벨노르피아



아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다

두두두우

판타지 장편소설

I BECAME THE ACADEMY'S DISABLED STUDENT

– 아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 4 -

-AUTHOR-
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[KINGMTL]

CHAPTER 152
TWIN-HEADED VENOM DRAGON (1)

The first time I discovered the Lake of Mana was during the 8th cycle.

And the first time I unlocked the Proof of Protection was in the 9th cycle.

I still remember the artifact information that the Measurement System revealed back then.

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸Measurement: Proof of Protection

▸Elements: [Artifact] [Top-tier] [Prosthetic Arm]…

▸Inherent Power: [Protection]

▹Detailed Description: ??? (Not unlocked)

– It's here…!

I raised both arms in triumph, my whole body tingling with excitement.

A top-tier artifact, one of the rarest to obtain, had appeared.

I had just stopped by the Lake of Mana, using it as a place to hide while fleeing from a Kill Order, hoping to raise my mana stats in the meantime… and here it was!

It had appeared!

'And the options… they look amazing!'

Protection. To guard and defend.

At a glance, it was clearly a defense-type ability. And not only that—it was top-tier and wearable, in the form of a prosthetic arm!

Naturally, my eyes lit up. Given that I was being relentlessly hunted down and frequently getting beaten to a pulp, this seemed like the perfect equipment.

With that hopeful thought, I eagerly clicked to equip it.

– Ding!

[The artifact, Proof of Protection, is evaluating its user.]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸Titles

[Gluttonous Wraith]

[Predator]

[Mass Slayer]

[Top-tier Wanted Criminal]

…

▸Mental State

[Hunger]: Intense craving for food.

[Appetite]: Overwhelming desire to consume.

[Emptiness]: Hollow, nothing within.

[Killing Intent]: Thoughts and desires to murder.

[Malice]: Will that belongs to the alignment of Evil.

…

[Player Adjustment System: Frontier]

[Quest: Kill 100,000 civilians (Completed).]

[Quest: Kill one Council Member of the Association (Completed).]

[Quest: Destroy the Free City of Trayvan (Completed).]

[Quest: Destroy the Free City of Lorderenium (Completed).]

…

[The artifact, Proof of Protection, is enraged!]

[The artifact, Proof of Protection, reveals intense hostility!]

– Zzzzt!

[HP 1002/2981]

…

[HP 998/2981]

‘Damn it.’

I couldn’t use it.

It was a picky artifact that rejected anyone it deemed unworthy.

At the time, during the 9th cycle when I had just started down the path of evil, I couldn’t wield it.

Of course, I didn't give up easily and tried multiple times, but the artifact was incredibly finicky.

I was frustrated. Up until the 8th cycle, I had been walking the path of good, but as soon as I switched to a darker alignment, this thing showed up.

I briefly considered just 'devouring' it using my abilities, but I worried it might resist and cause problems before it was fully digested, so I ended up selling it on the black market.

I couldn't use it in the 10th cycle either.

In the 11th cycle, even with the Evil stats slightly lowered as the Diamond Warrior, I still got electrocuted for my efforts.

It's an artifact with ridiculously strict requirements.

So naturally, I was a bit worried.

Could I even use it?

Could I, of all people, satisfy the conditions of an artifact that blatantly required a Good alignment?

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It worked.

And it was incredibly simple… I hadn't even done anything, and it unlocked on its own.

'What the hell?'

I observed the Proof of Protection, now functioning as my left arm, with a

strange feeling.

As its name suggests, the Proof of Protection had taken the shape of an arm.

Its appearance wasn't particularly delicate but rather crude, and its color was a bright white.

'It stings.'

The severed part of my arm throbbed.

It felt itchy at times, while at other times it burned as though scorched by fire.

Back in Shipnaha, when Aerulus had cut off my arm, my mana circuits had naturally been torn apart along with it.

– Crackle…

The severed ends of my mana circuits began to wriggle and extend toward the prosthetic arm, slowly rooting themselves.

Mana from the prosthetic began to flow into my mana circuits, connecting with them.

This process was being visibly represented as golden lines forming on the surface of the prosthetic.

You could call it a kind of synchronization or grafting process.

"Ah, ah! Wait, Hayul!"

As I was enduring the rising pain, Choi Jiyeon, who had been watching with wide, blank eyes, suddenly panicked and slapped the Proof of Protection on my left arm.

"You can't use that! Take it off, quickly…!"

[Huh?]

Take it off?

I blinked in confusion at her sudden demand, but Choi Jiyeon, looking frantic, began pulling hard on my left arm.

Since the grafting process was underway, I could feel faint sensations from it.

“You can’t use artifacts like that! It’ll block your body’s natural regeneration!”

‘Ah, so that’s what she meant.’

Despite this world’s paranormal abilities, the loss of limbs was still considered a significant injury.

However, it wasn’t an irreparable injury.

Though it would take time and be costly, it was possible to restore lost limbs.

Even if a part of the body is lost, the blueprint for that part remains imprinted on the soul.

By flooding the body with life force and following that blueprint, the lost limb can be regenerated.

‘But… ’

I glanced at the prosthetic arm. The golden lines on its surface shimmered. The sensations coming from it were becoming more refined.

Once an artifact like this, capable of grafting onto torn mana circuits, was attached, the original blueprint would likely be altered.

In other words, wearing this prosthetic arm might mean I could never restore my real arm.

[It’s fine.]

“Huh?”

That didn’t really matter to me.

Choi Jiyeon blinked in surprise.

I gently removed her hands from my arm and bowed my head slightly.

[Thank you for your concern.]

[But really, it’s okay.]

I shook my head, flexing my still-awkward left fingers.

‘I don’t have the luxury to fuss over something like that… ’

I wasn’t even sure if I would live for another ten years.

I couldn’t afford to throw away a top-tier artifact just because of the fear of not being able to restore one arm.

– Crack!

I activated the Power of Space to open an exit.

The space a short distance ahead split open.

A blue vortex formed at its center, drawing in the mist that filled the cave.

[The exit is open.]

[Let’s hurry out.]

If Choi Jiyeon’s information was correct, we didn’t have time to loiter here.

Realizing this, Choi Jiyeon let out a long sigh and nodded.

“…Right. Yeah, we should.”

She composed herself and began drawing the earth to form armor around her, taking the lead.

Choi Jiyeon exited the dungeon first.

As expected from a tank, she naturally put herself at the front.

I followed, stepping into the vortex.

.

.

.

‘Tch.’

The moment I stepped outside the dungeon, I felt a sense of unease.

The surroundings had changed from when we’d first entered.

The earth was dying.

Although the poison hadn’t spread to the point of creating a toxic swamp, the vegetation, already weak and withering, was clearly affected.

‘This poison… is from the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.’

This area had also fallen within its influence. Even if the entrance was different, it was still the same dungeon.

The entrance must have been relatively close.

Which meant… the Twin-headed Venom Dragon wasn’t far either.

After confirming this, my expression hardened.

‘Could it really have become an undead… ’

In the original story, the resurrection of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon happened about three years later.

During that time, it needed to gather more sacrifices and remnants of its previous self.

Even then, it was described as unstable, rampaging uncontrollably due to its incomplete state.

'But… '

According to Choi Jiyeon, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, though unstable, was still being controlled to some extent.

I knew what Kyowon, the leader of the Death Cult, was capable of.

I also understood that, since this wasn't a game but reality, there could be unexpected variables.

But even with that in mind, it didn't make sense.

If Kyowon had the ability to control a 3rd-tier Alpha monster, even in a degraded state, there would be no need for him to hide like this.

– Zzt, crackle…

[Transmission failed.]

"Tch, the communications are down."

Choi Jiyeon clicked her tongue after trying to send a message through her smartwatch.

[It's probably because there are too many dungeons in this area.]

In regions dense with dungeons, mana waves become chaotic.

This often causes communication devices to malfunction.

Despite her repeated attempts to send a signal, Choi Jiyeon continued to survey the surroundings.

“Then for now, let’s head to the nearest Free City.”

[Are you planning to stop the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, Senior?]

“Yeah. We’ll get reinforcements soon, but we can’t just sit and wait.”

Choi Jiyeon spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She truly was an incredible person.

‘She’s a good person.’

She was worried I’d have to live with a prosthetic for the rest of my life, and despite her own injuries, she unconsciously took the lead.

And now, without hesitation, she was willing to risk her life to fight for others.

The reason she was injured in the first place was because she had volunteered to act as bait to save others.

I had only just spoken with Choi Jiyeon for the first time, but it was clear that she was a kind-hearted person.

– Ah, the difference in talent, damn it.

…In the original story, she would’ve had a small sense of inferiority? Jealousy? toward Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

[Understood.]

[In that case, please wait for a moment.]

I asked for her understanding as she prepared to charge ahead, then took a deep breath and focused.

The pain in my left arm still gnawed at my nerves, but it wasn't unbearable.

'Power of Observation.'

Normally, I fixed the method of using it.

I would set a specific range and gather all the information within that range.

Sometimes, I would adjust the range temporarily—widening or narrowing it—but ultimately, the usage remained the same: fix a range and collect information.

That was all I knew.

It was the same method I'd used when the Power of Space was clumsily intertwined with it.

Though this method was convenient and effective, I couldn't cover a vast area with my current level of skill.

A limit to the range. Collecting highly concentrated information within that range.

'I'll change the method.'

This time, I didn't limit the range.

I simply excluded the underground, expanding the range as far as I could.

I didn't seek detailed or dense information. I only needed to find one specific entity.

Bringing both hands together in front of my chest, I formed a hand seal I hadn't used since losing my left hand… a kind of self-hypnosis.

My white prosthetic and the black sleeve of my right arm pressed against each other.

– Crack!

A fissure appeared across the limits of my Observation.

Like a spider's web, the cracks spread before shattering entirely.

The walls crumbled, and the range expanded.

Zzt! A slight strain hit my brain.

My nose tingled.

"Hayul?"

It seemed like I had a nosebleed. No big deal. I expanded the range further.

I wasn't collecting detailed information. I filtered everything out. The only information I needed was that of the poison.

There was a direction where the poison grew thicker. I adjusted my Observation toward that direction, and the poison became even denser.

A wave of poison surged.

And then…

– Chills.

'Found it.'

I observed a snake that couldn't possibly be considered alive.

A massive body, one head missing. Waves of poison continuously gushed from its maw.

My face hardened.

The creature was approaching a city.

A city still filled with people who hadn't yet managed to evacuate.

[I've found it.]

"For now, wipe your nose—what? You found what?"

Choi Jiyeon, who had been pulling a cloth from her subspace pocket to wipe my nose, stared at me in disbelief.

[Twin-headed Venom Dragon.]

[I've pinpointed its location.]

Choi Jiyeon's eyes widened, as if she couldn't believe what she had just heard.

I extended my hand and grasped hers.

"Huh? Why are you suddenly—"

Her body trembled as I took her hand. I felt a bit sorry if I had startled her, but there was no time to hesitate.

[I'll explain everything later.]

[We're moving now.]

"Wait, why are you holding my hand…?"

– Woooong!

Choi Jiyeon's words were cut off.

The surrounding space rippled several times, as if warping.

"Wait, this is—!"

'Manifestation of the Power of Space.'

The rippling space abruptly contracted, warping into a vortex.

We were swallowed into that vortex.

The next moment, a dizzying sensation of weightlessness washed over me.

Whoosh! The sound of the wind roared in my ears.

My hair flew upward.

“W-what the…?”

Choi Jiyeon made a dazed sound once again.

“Ah.”

She looked around, her head swiveling. She must have been seeing the sky, with the ground far below her.

“This is insane.”

And beneath her, she would see the head of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

Ignoring her shock, I drew back my right arm.

‘Expansion Ability, Homogenization.’

Clench! My fist tightened. Concentrated mana surged, leaking between my fingers.

It was nighttime. The surroundings were dark. The earth, soaked in poison, was bathed in a sickly green glow.

‘Midday Sun.’

Suddenly, golden light erupted, banishing the darkness.

The light shot out in a straight line, piercing the head of the Twin-headed

Venom Dragon.

* * *

[The artifact, Proof of Protection, is evaluating its user.]

…

[The artifact, Proof of Protection, recognizes the user.]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Levels]

Lee Hayul → Choi Jiyeon

●●●○○○○○○○ (21▷31/100)

[Heir of Taesan] [Good Person]

CHAPTER 153
TWIN-HEADED VENOM DRAGON (2)

A golden trajectory cleaved through the sky in a straight line.

The trajectory pierced the serpent's head as it tore through the air.

-Sssssshhhh!

Moments after the strike, the golden hue spread like spilled paint across the surroundings.

Shockwaves and thunderous booms echoed in all directions as the poisonous liquid surrounding the Twin-headed Venom Dragon churned violently.

The serpent's head tilted to the side.

A roar erupted from its gaping maw.

Despite being an undead creature, the scream carried an undercurrent of pain, shards of broken scales scattering in the wind.

'Tough.'

Landing briefly on the serpent's head, Lee Hayul furrowed his brow.

The result was unsatisfactory.

He had used spatial teleportation to move to the optimal location and then unleashed [Midday Sun], one of his most powerful single-strike abilities.

And yet, all it had done was to peel away a portion of the outer scales. He hadn't expected to kill it in one blow, but the damage was minimal in comparison to the effort expended.

“Aaaaaahhh—!”

A sharp scream echoed from above at that moment.

It was Choi Jiyeon, plummeting through the air toward him.

Even though she was screaming due to the fact that she was soaring through the sky, Choi Jiyeon immediately grasped the situation and aimed her falling trajectory toward Lee Hayul.

In her hands, she wielded a stone axe.

Gripping the long handle tightly with both hands, she raised it above her head. The blade of the axe was engulfed in a fierce aura of Qi, swelling with power.

Lee Hayul immediately kicked off the serpent’s head.

At that exact moment, Choi Jiyeon’s axe, infused with the mighty strength of Taesan, descended from the sky.

– KWAANG!!

– SSSHHHAAAA!!

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon, still disoriented and unable to regain its senses, shook its head violently.

Far more scales than before shattered and scattered into the air.

From the exposed area where the scales had been torn off, a dark green fluid spurted out with a sharp hiss.

Even the blood was poison. That venomous blood was so lethal that just brushing against it would put one’s life in danger.

The serpent thrashed its head wildly.

Choi Jiyeon, who had landed atop the creature's head, was flung into the air.

"Ah."

Her eyes widened as she glanced downward.

The ground below, where she had expected to land, was covered in a sea of poisonous liquid that had long since dissolved any trees or rocks, and was now even consuming the earth itself.

"Ah, waaaah!"

She let out another panicked scream.

"…Ah?"

Her scream abruptly ceased.

She blinked in confusion as she found herself floating next to Lee Hayul, carried by the spirits of the wind.

"…Hey! Junior! What's the big idea, kidnapping me without warning?"

Then she raised her voice in irritation.

"You threw me into the sky out of nowhere! I almost fell straight into that poisonous lake and died!"

[I'm sorry.]

[I didn't have the luxury to explain.]

At his calm explanation, Choi Jiyeon averted her gaze slightly.

In the direction the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had been moving, there was a Free City where evacuations were still ongoing.

It wasn't much of a city, barely deserving of the name, and the entire area

was already being soaked in poison due to the encroaching influence.

‘……’

After confirming this, Choi Jiyeon’s expression softened.

“Ugh, well, if that’s the case, I guess there’s no helping it… But still, how on earth are you using spatial magic…?”

Choi Jiyeon mumbled as if something had just occurred to her, her tone incredulous. She seemed to assume that the method Lee Hayul had used to close such a vast distance was spatial magic.

[It’s something I happened to learn from the Vice Principal.]

He responded nonchalantly.

-Ssssshh…

The brief moment of respite came to an end.

Choi Jiyeon’s expression hardened as she turned to look once more at their foe.

The poisonous liquid on the ground was bubbling and frothing, emitting a noxious gas that filled the air.

Amidst it all, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon raised its head again.

Twin heads.

Despite the name, the creature now had only one remaining.

Originally, as the name suggested, it was a two-headed entity.

The head that remained spewed deadly poison, while the head that had been lost would have originally emitted disease-laden gas—a venomous serpent through and through.

That was one small mercy.

Had both heads been intact, the combination of poison and disease would have caused anyone in its range to die almost instantly.

In the original story, it had been resurrected with both heads restored.

And it had rampaged, coinciding with a period when monsters were flooding out from the Demonic Realm, causing immense devastation.

So much so that, had it gone unchecked, all of China could have turned into a Demonic Realm.

By comparison, the current Twin-headed Venom Dragon was incomplete—pathetic, even.

'…It's still incomplete.'

Using the Power of Observation, Lee Hayul confirmed his suspicion.

Undead are typically weaker than they were in life.

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon, having been raised as an undead, had similarly been diminished in strength.

Moreover, the hasty and inadequate preparations for its resurrection had left it even further weakened.

– Crack.

One of the already cracked scales fell off.

It was from the part of the head that Lee Hayul and Choi Jiyeon had just struck.

'If it were in its prime, we wouldn't have even scratched it.'

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon was an undead whose unique ability was

poison and disease. Its physical strength ranked only at the tail end of the 3rd-tier monsters.

Its two pairs of eyes, which had been rolling sluggishly, now fixated on them.

The lifeless gaze characteristic of undead creatures locked onto them.

– SSSSHAAAAA—!

Letting out a venomous roar, the dragon charged toward them.

Lee Hayul immediately commanded the wind spirits, surrounding himself and Choi Jiyeon in a protective barrier, while luring the dragon away from the city.

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon didn't care about the city.

It only had one target—Lee Hayul, pursuing him in a straight line.

'It's fast.'

For a serpent, its speed was beyond expectations. At this rate, it would catch up soon.

Moreover…

-Crack! Its jaws split apart. The surge of mana indicated venom was about to be unleashed from its throat.

The deadly breath of poison.

Just as Lee Hayul clicked his tongue in preparation to counter it—

– BOOM!

Suddenly, a wall of rock erupted in the path of the dragon.

The poisonous breath spewed forth. Ssssshh! The wall melted almost

instantly, unable to withstand the venom.

Choi Jiyeon narrowed her eyes and stretched out her hand.

In response to her gesture, more rock walls rose one after another.

The breath of poison dissipated after destroying a few more layers of stone.

Then the dragon closed its jaws and rammed its head into the remaining wall.

Crash! The wall shattered from the impact.

– Rumble!

But that wasn't the end. More walls of rock sprang up in real-time, blocking the path of the venomous dragon and absorbing its poison.

Additionally, earthen hands rose from the ground, grabbing hold of the dragon's body, while stone projectiles battered its remaining head.

Though the walls crumbled from a single headbutt, and the earthen hands couldn't hold the dragon for long due to its sheer strength and venomous scales, the interference was enough to maintain distance.

Choi Jiyeon's long-range attacks successfully blocked the dragon's assaults.

Thanks to her efforts, Lee Hayul could focus solely on maneuvering through the air.

"…Junior, just hold on a little longer. With a situation like this, an emergency signal must have already been sent. The subjugation team will be here soon."

Choi Jiyeon spoke through gritted teeth as she worked to slow the Twin-headed Venom Dragon's advance.

"And can't you find its true body with your detection ability?"

She swallowed nervously, glancing at the venomous dragon, which was glaring at them with murderous intent.

“If we can just kill the true body… this monstrous snake and all the undead rampaging around will collapse on their own.”

A major weakness of necromancers and summoners is that if their true body is destroyed, their summoned creatures collapse like a house of cards.

The same thing had happened to the Hybrid Summoner during the 12th cycle.

Had that summoner been able to call forth all their summoned beasts, they wouldn’t just have survived—they might have single-handedly turned the tide against the allied forces.

“…If we can just deal with the true body.”

Though she said it, Choi Jiyeon didn’t seem to expect a positive response.

After all, summoners are notorious for hiding themselves away in heavily fortified positions.

Finding them is no easy task. Even with a detection ability, locating them is a painstaking process, requiring great effort and time—it’s not something that can be done in an instant.

[I’ve found it.]

“Really?!”

Her face lit up with hope at his reply.

Lee Hayul nodded and pointed in the direction where the true body was located.

Choi Jiyeon followed the direction of his finger.

"…Where is the true body?"

His finger was pointed at the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

The Power of Observation indicated that the true body was right in front of them.

Just like how elementalists are linked to their spirits through contracts, necromancers are similarly bound to their undead.

There are connection points, but while the theory is straightforward, it's not something that can be seen with the naked eye.

The Power of Observation, however, had traced the connection.

It required significant mental effort, but the truth had been revealed.

In the information gathered through his observation…

The undead, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, was linked to itself, as if the thread led back into its own being.

'…Tch.'

Lee Hayul clicked his tongue as he realized the truth.

The mystery of how the necromancer had managed to raise the Twin-headed Venom Dragon as an undead, despite lacking the necessary materials and power, was now clear.

'The necromancer sacrificed himself.'

That explained everything. Whether or not the fusion was perfect, it was clear the necromancer couldn't be separated from the dragon.

Choi Jiyeon's eyes trembled slightly.

She had been hoping for a different answer.

But unfortunately, Lee Hayul confirmed what she least wanted to hear.

[The true body.]

[It's that.]

"…Shit."

[Excuse me?]

"Nothing. My mistake."

She didn't offer any more complaints.

Choi Jiyeon simply bit her lip and turned her gaze toward the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, which was still glaring in their direction.

"…?"

It was glaring directly at them.

But oddly enough, Choi Jiyeon wasn't the one in its sights.

She followed the dragon's gaze and found it fixed on Lee Hayul.

'It's targeting me.'

For some reason, the dragon was singularly focused on him.

Even though Choi Jiyeon had attacked its head twice, it paid her no mind.

It was solely fixated on killing him.

'……'

Lee Hayul narrowed his eyes in contemplation for a moment before speaking.

[Senior.]

[I'll lure it away on my own.]

"Absolutely not!"

Choi Jiyeon shouted, her voice sharp with urgency.

"You could get caught at any moment! The best option is for us to hold out together! The reinforcements will be here any minute! If we can just make it until then…!"

[Please help the civilians.]

Her desperate words were abruptly cut off.

Choi Jiyeon closed her mouth, gazing at him in disbelief.

[There are still plenty of people who haven't evacuated.]

[There are many dungeons going berserk due to the influence of the undead.]

[You can save a lot of people, Senior.]

Lee Hayul glanced away, though not to avoid her gaze, but to at least face her directly.

[Don't worry about me.]

"…You'll die."

[Don't worry.]

[I won't die.]

[Trust me.]

He shook his head slightly.

[It's precisely because I don't want to die that I'm doing this.]

.

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Riding on the wind spirit's back, Choi Jiyeon grew smaller in the distance.

After confirming she had safely departed, Lee Hayul turned to observe behind him.

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon was still hot on his trail, paying no attention to Choi Jiyeon.

The distance between them was rapidly closing. The mana building up in the dragon's jaws swelled violently.

At first, it had chased Choi Jiyeon relentlessly, but now, for some unknown reason, all its aggression was directed at him.

Sighing deeply, Lee Hayul loosened his robe.

Gripping the fabric, he tossed the robe haphazardly into the air.

The space around him rippled as the robe was sucked into an air pocket.

Simultaneously, the dragon fully opened its maw. The gathered mana shot out like a laser beam.

It wasn't pure venom, but a mana beam infused with poisonous energy.

– KWAANG!

The greenish-black mana beam shot forward in an instant. The

accompanying shockwave tore apart the landscape, flipping over what little vegetation and terrain had remained.

If that beam struck directly, nothing would be left of him—not even a corpse.

Lee Hayul extended his right arm toward the incoming beam.

His hand clenched into a fist.

– KRRRK!

The mana beam split apart just before reaching him.

The greenish-black energy fractured in the empty space, passing harmlessly by his sides and gouging deep furrows into the ground.

KABOOM! The delayed explosion roared behind him.

Among the dying trees, a jagged V-shaped scar was carved into the earth.

– SSSHHAA…

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon hesitated at the sight of something it had never seen before.

Its massive body coiled up as if to shield something. The eerie scraping sound of its greenish-black scales rubbing together filled the air.

It straightened its neck, and its two pairs of eyes rolled wildly as they fixed on him once more.

‘……’

Though it was just an illustration in a game, the memory of it overlapped with the information he was now facing.

A massive body that could easily wrap around a skyscraper, yet still leave more than enough room.

A dragon's wings jutting out awkwardly from the middle of its body.

Hundreds of eyes rolling continuously in its head, which was adorned with three pairs of thick horns.

A mouth filled with countless razor-sharp teeth and dozens of forked tongues.

A dragon of the earth that had failed to become a dragon of the sky.

'Master of the Tower of Necromancy.'

There were many differences between the two, but for some reason, that image flashed in his mind.

He had heard stories from the Gop-hwa Clan.

Hong Yeon-hwa's father, the clan leader of Gop-hwa, was stationed within the Demonic Realm.

He should have attended the regular clan gathering, but due to certain circumstances, he had remained within the realm.

In the original story, those circumstances were eventually revealed.

'He must have discovered a tower.'

A necromancer's tower.

Since this was reality and not a game, it could be a tower yet to be conquered.

Which one could it be?

He couldn't say for sure.

But it was likely a necromancer's tower.

And regardless, nothing changed.

'Eventually, I'll have to fight.'

Whether it was this serpent, which was probably a 4th-tier creature at best…

Or naturally occurring 2nd-tier monsters in the future…

Or the tower lords and their armies that might someday invade…

He didn't know if he could win.

If he only cared about surviving, running away would be the easier option.

But if he wanted to live a happy life with the people who cared for him, running wasn't an option.

Because eventually, he'd find himself facing an insurmountable cliff.

And so, he stopped running.

He turned around.

He faced his foe head-on.

'Summon Spirits.'

– Crack- The space behind him split open.

Along with the wind spirit that had been circling him, the other spirits with whom he had formed contracts descended all at once.

In an instant, the area was filled with hundreds of glowing motes of light.

– Hwaaaa!

The wings of the sky, which had previously resembled cloaks, began to transform.

Having absorbed a significant amount of mana from the Lake of Mana, the Wings of the Sky now shimmered with even more vibrant and vivid colors.

Lee Hayul had also absorbed a massive amount of pure mana, causing both his power and the wings to swell with immense energy.

With a flick of his wings, they unfurled like a carpet.

Split into three pairs, the wings now resembled something akin to a bird's wings.

Shwaaah! As they expanded, the white and blue wings absorbed the spirits one by one.

Like towels soaking up water, the spirits merged into the wings.

The wings, filled with mana and spirits, grew even larger.

The intensity of the light radiating from them increased dramatically.

They continued to expand, stretching farther and farther.

The pure white color was soon tinged with hues of other colors.

– Flap!

With a single beat of the wings, a rainbow of light scattered through the air.

Red, blue, green, yellow, brown.

The multi-colored light illuminated the dying earth below.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Levels]

Lee Hayul → Choi Jiyeon

●●●●○○○○○○ (31▷40/100)

[Heir of Taesan] [Good Person]

…

[The artifact [Wings of the Sky] reveals its true potential.]

…

[Mental State [Neutral] is shifting.]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Malice Rejection]

[The system expresses violent rejection toward the undead!]

[Main Quest [Tower of Necromancy] linked.]

[Quest [Twin-headed Venom Dragon] linked.]

[Quest [Demonic Realm Expansion in China] linked.]

[Supporting the Savior!]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Salvation Mode]

[Mental State [Salvation], [Goodwill], [Sacrifice] confirmed.]

[Supporting the Savior!]

CHAPTER 154
TWIN-HEADED VENOM DRAGON (3)

– Crack.

The dragon's jaw twisted.

The jagged teeth clashed together, emitting a harsh grinding sound as the venomous dragon let out a low growl.

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon, which had been defeated decades ago by more than a dozen top-tier heroes, was now brimming with hostility.

Monsters that reach the 3rd tier naturally gain intelligence, but this dragon had lived according to its primal instincts.

The venomous dragon harbored both malice and killing intent toward the unpleasant light that sought to purify and destroy it.

'What is this?'

Within the dragon's body, Kyowon, the leader of the Death Cult, was puzzled.

Kyowon had used insufficient sacrifices, supplementing his power through both his followers and himself. The followers had died instantly, while Kyowon had lost his body, transferring his consciousness into the dragon's form.

It was a temporary reprieve. The dragon's will was so powerful that Kyowon could not fully control it. Despite the blessing of his god, he could only subtly guide and manipulate its actions.

In the end, his consciousness merged with the monster's body. This poorly executed resurrection would not last long before it collapsed.

Although Kyowon was prolonging the inevitable by devouring humans and monsters to replenish the sacrifices in real time, destruction was certain.

Yet, Kyowon didn't care. Rather, he felt ecstasy.

Through the blessing of his god, he had completed the resurrection ritual. In this moment, he felt as though he had become one with his god.

Thanks to this, he could faintly sense the will of the divine. Though the overwhelming presence threatened to crush his very soul, he could still feel it.

'Hostility.'

The dark and damp greenish world was momentarily bathed in light.

The world once suffused with a murky green suddenly brightened.

Its source was high in the sky.

Three pairs of radiant, colorful wings fluttered.

With each beat, traces of aurora-like light streaked across the clear sky.

A beautiful aurora unfolded in the heavens.

Even Kyowon, who was merged with the dragon, momentarily thought the wings were beautiful—but his god bore hostility toward them.

'Hostility?'

Could it really be called hostility? Kyowon was briefly struck with doubt.

The god felt malice toward those wings. They wanted to tear them apart. To make sure they would never fly again. To root them out so they could never defile the sky again.

And then…

‘Gri—’

– Ssshhhhaaaaaa!

Kyowon’s consciousness began to fade.

In its place, the dragon’s consciousness surged to the surface. The dragon did not hide its hostility. It let out a fierce roar, unleashing its venomous energy.

Vast amounts of mana gathered in its maw.

The dragon’s mana wasn’t just poisonous. It held power befitting its rank.

Simply unleashing its mana could overturn the surroundings, spreading its deadly venom in every direction.

This type of mana emission was the primary attack method for large monsters.

The dragon opened its jaws. It was not aiming to poison but to destroy, using raw mana.

– Kwoooooaaaa!

Tremendous mana poured out.

A dark green beam tore through the air.

The mana beam shot straight for Lee Hayul, who had spread his wings wide.

Lee Hayul flapped his wings.

Crackle! Sparks flew.

To the dragon’s eyes, it looked like lightning had flashed. It could see the tail of the lightning, but the head was missing.

For a moment, its target had vanished.

Having missed its mark, the mana beam pierced through the sky and slammed into the ground.

A long scar was carved into the earth, and half-melted soil erupted into the air.

Sensing something amiss, the dragon quickly turned its head.

Its vision shifted, and soon it saw wings—now more yellow and green than before.

The dragon was puzzled. Such speed? Not something it couldn't perceive, but still unexpected.

Whoooosh! A fierce storm suddenly rushed from the front. The violent winds peeled away some of the poisonous substance clinging to the dragon's armored body.

The venomous layer was stripped away, revealing the scarred scales on its head.

Crackle! More lightning sparked around the wings.

Lee Hayul accelerated. His right fist clenched.

From his tightly gripped fist, a golden light flickered.

'Homogenization: Midday Sun.'

– Boom!!

The dragon's head jerked back violently. The mana shielding its head shattered. Broken scales scattered, and more of its venomous blood and poison oozed out than before.

The second strike of Midday Sun followed.

Instinct screamed a warning.

Lee Hayul instantly flapped his wings. The lightning spirit within the wings moved. Crackling with electricity, his body accelerated once more.

The spot where he had just been was obliterated by the dragon's tail as it lashed out like a whip.

Crack! The tail tore through the air and gouged out the earth.

Lee Hayul, now at a safe distance, narrowed his eyes and flapped his wings again.

Just a small graze on the wing had caused the edge to rot away.

Before the venom could spread through his body, he quickly severed the affected part and poured mana into it to restore the damage.

As expected, the pain was real.

It felt like his flesh was being carved by a blade and the tender inner layers were being seared by a hot iron.

The Wings of the Sky were an artifact.

Even if they were torn, he shouldn't feel pain. But because he was in a 'connected' state, some sensations were transmitted.

Currently, Lee Hayul was connected to the Wings of the Sky.

It was a method he had devised before but was trying for the first time now.

Previously, he hadn't attempted it because he couldn't figure out how to establish the connection.

But earlier, he had grasped the principle. He had closely observed the process of linking the Proof of Protection and circuits.

Now, he simply had to replicate it. He connected the circuits on his side to the Wings of the Sky.

– Ssssaaaaa!

The dragon roared in fury.

Blood trickled from the wound on its head. It growled low in its throat, drawing mana to the surface once more.

The mana once again coated its scales in a thick layer.

From between the gaps in the scales, poisonous liquid oozed, spreading across its entire body.

Lee Hayul frowned.

The mana and poison armor he had painstakingly stripped away was back again.

He had intended to follow up with consecutive strikes while the armor was down, but the opportunity hadn't come.

'It's faster than before.'

Was it holding back earlier? The dragon's movements were continuously growing faster.

The tail swipe just now had nearly grazed his body.

'Should I strip it away again with wind?'

He had already used that technique once, so there was a good chance it would be countered next time.

He needed to be cautious.

The dragon could afford to take multiple hits, but Lee Hayul couldn't afford

even a single mistake. Just one serious blow, and it was over for him.

Whooosh! He flapped his wings again. The colors of the wings returned to their rainbow hue.

Unfamiliar levels of acceleration put a strain on his body. He couldn't overuse the lightning spirit for constant bursts of speed.

Moreover, his body was starting to feel numb. It was as though his limbs were cramping, a tingling sensation running through his hands and feet.

'Tsk.'

He summoned a strong wind.

The wind peeled away the poisonous liquid from around the dragon and also dispersed the venomous gas that had been lingering nearby.

Before the poison could refill the space, he closed in and struck again.

Even so, he was still getting poisoned. Was it from the faint traces of venom that remained? Or perhaps new poison had already begun to seep in.

Either way, even a small amount was affecting him.

He could heal himself.

It wasn't life-threatening.

'Close combat isn't ideal.'

But the dragon always had poison surrounding it.

If he made a mistake while closing in, and the venom doused him thoroughly, there was no doubt he would die.

Even if that didn't happen, lingering too close for too long would allow the venom to accumulate, eventually dealing fatal damage.

‘Long-range attacks… ’

He flapped his wings again. Along with the trail of the aurora, red and yellow feathers shot forward.

He cast a spell. Pouring mana into a simple but powerful attack spell, he unleashed it in an instant.

The feathers and dozens of spells sliced through the air, bombarding the dragon’s body.

Explosions erupted.

Flames spread across the poisoned liquid, and lightning crackled through the dragon’s body.

– Ssshhhh…

But there were no significant injuries. The flames and lightning were absorbed by the poisonous liquid.

Dozens of attack spells couldn’t penetrate the mana shield that enveloped the dragon’s body.

The dragon began to close the distance, moving its massive body.

Its speed was anything but slow.

At the same time, its jaws opened.

Like a counterattack, mana beams were fired in short, rapid bursts from its gaping maw.

Lee Hayul leaped backward, hurling his own attacks in response.

Hundreds of feathers and spells rained down.

In midair, the attacks clashed. While Lee Hayul’s side had more in number,

the power behind them was lacking.

He observed the trajectories. His Power of Observation pulled in an overwhelming amount of information from the surroundings.

Tracking the paths wasn't difficult.

He moved his body according to the trajectories. He ignored the attacks that wouldn't land.

For the dangerous ones, he subtly altered the trajectory.

For those he couldn't avoid, he shifted his body just slightly to dodge them.

The wind spirit adjusted his overall movements, while the lightning spirit provided bursts of speed when needed.

Weaving through the storm of attacks as if performing aerial acrobatics, Lee Hayul danced between the streams of mana.

Three pairs of wings fluttered, leaving trails of aurora in their wake.

The sight was so graceful that it appeared as though he were dancing, and this only made the dragon's hostility burn brighter.

– Ssshhhhhaaaaa…!

The distance between them was closing.

For some reason, even with the dragon's increased speed, Lee Hayul found it difficult to maintain the gap.

Unless he used the lightning spirit to accelerate, the distance continued to shrink.

'And if I get too far, that causes its own problems.'

Lee Hayul extended his hand. The air rippled, and his hand disappeared into

the void.

A subspace. A type of storage created using the Power of Space.

It was the first technique he had developed using spatial power, and he had stashed quite a few things inside.

After rummaging for a moment, his hand emerged, holding a bow.

The bow was black with no significant decorations.

It was a large bow, easily twice Lee Hayul's size.

It wasn't a special artifact. Just a well-crafted, durable bow.

While flying, he grabbed the bow with his left hand and pulled the string back with his right.

Creak… The sound of tension echoed as an arrow of mana formed along the bowstring.

The arrow, formed by absorbing the mana, glowed white.

Previously, the arrows had been blue, but now they were white.

The quality of the mana had improved, making the arrow more powerful, but it wasn't enough to deal significant damage to the dragon.

'Homogenization: Gop-hwa.'

Woosh! The arrow's shape began to distort. From his right hand, the flames of Gop-hwa flickered and formed the arrow.

It was an attack he had once fired by accident from the Tower of Growth.

Back then, the situation had been chaotic, and he had shot it on a whim, but now he could add more steps to the process.

The flames of Gop-hwa flared.

It was different from before. The quality of the mana being used as fuel, his control over the mana, and his understanding of Gop-hwa had all improved.

Instead of holding back, he poured more power into the flames, letting them consume whatever they wished, fueling their intensity.

He enveloped it in Qi. The once-white Qi was now dyed red by the flames of Gop-hwa.

He flapped his wings, releasing more feathers.

Red and green feathers clung to the flames.

The new fire was fueled by the feathers, while the wind fanned the flames, increasing their intensity.

He also used magic and elemental techniques to further boost the power.

– Ssshhhhhaaaa!

The dragon roared. It abandoned its scattered attacks and gathered a massive amount of mana.

Its tightly sealed jaws swelled as if it were holding something enormous.

This was the precursor to another mana beam attack.

But this time, it was far more intense than before.

The ground trembled violently. The air was being sucked into the dragon's open maw.

The distance between them had shrunk considerably.

If it fired at this range, there would be no escaping the blast radius.

Lee Hayul glanced at his left arm… his prosthetic.

The Proof of Protection. Synchronization was complete. At that moment, a new set of information had imprinted itself in his mind.

Having made his decision, Lee Hayul did not dodge. Instead, he drew the bowstring even further.

The bow, unable to fully contain the Gop-hwa flame, began to melt.

But before that could happen, the dragon's jaws opened wide.

For a brief moment, the world flashed. The murky colors of the sky turned green. A mana beam the size of a skyscraper shot forth.

There was no sound. Instead, the air and ground along its path were obliterated.

Before worrying about being poisoned, just getting caught in the blast would leave nothing behind—not even a corpse.

Facing this, Lee Hayul did not release the bowstring.

'Power manifestation: Space.'

Just like before.

The space around him rippled.

Like a stone dropping into a pond, the void quivered.

A screeching sound echoed.

It was a noise that couldn't be heard with normal ears—the sound of the space itself warping.

Immediately after, a space barrier formed in front of Lee Hayul.

– Krrrraaaaack!

The mana beam crashed into the barrier, right in front of him.

It couldn't break through.

The greenish-black beam failed to penetrate the spatial wall, instead spreading out in a circular pattern along its surface.

Though the dragon increased the mana beam's output, it could not break the spatial barrier.

No matter how powerful a monster might be, it couldn't maintain such a high-output mana beam for long.

Gradually, the beam began to fade.

A failed attack.

And now, what follows is always the enemy's counterattack.

Retracting the barrier, Lee Hayul crouched slightly and wrapped his wings around his body.

Finally, he released the bowstring that had been trembling as if it would snap at any moment.

The arrow shot forward.

The rush of wind whipped his wings like a tempest.

A streak of red cut through the air.

The already weakened mana beam couldn't stop the arrow.

The red streak pierced straight through the greenish-black mana beam, surging in reverse.

The dragon’s eyes widened. The flaming arrow was cutting through its attack and hurtling toward him.

The arrow was faster than the dragon’s response.

In an instant, the arrow lodged itself into the dragon’s head.

– Kwooooooooaaaaaa—!

The flames of Gop-hwa ignited.

The dark night sky was dyed crimson.

A storm of fire swept across the land.

The explosive heat seared the skin as if it were being roasted.

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Moments later, Lee Hayul spread his wings again and surveyed the surroundings.

The ground had been overturned, and fiery embers danced across the scorched earth.

The poisonous liquid had completely evaporated.

Where the flames hadn’t touched, patches of charred ground were exposed.

The sky was still red. Even the venomous gas had been swept away, leaving behind only the shimmering heat rising from the flames.

But Lee Hayul’s expression didn’t relax.

Instead, he grimaced in frustration.

Within the center of the explosion lay the coiled snake. The scales were charred, ash drifting from its blackened surface, and the flames of Gop-hwa were still gnawing at it.

Soon, the snake's head, which had been buried in its coils, began to rise.

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon's glowing eyes gleamed with murderous intent.

'Damn it… '

Lee Hayul swallowed a curse and began to think rapidly.

Midday Sun. If he struck consecutively, he could crush its head completely. But in that time, he'd likely succumb to the poison and die first.

Gop-hwa. If he kept burning it, he could kill the dragon. However, that would allow the undead summoned by Kyowon to continue rampaging, causing more destruction.

There were other ways… plenty of them. If he used everything, he could toy with the dragon and drag out the fight without being caught.

'No.'

Though he had told Choi Jiyeon he would retreat, Lee Hayul had no intention of running.

Lee Hayul wanted to kill the Twin-headed Venom Dragon before more destruction could occur.

But at this moment, he had no stronger technique left to use.

'…Taesan.'

He didn’t have it yet.

But he could meet the conditions necessary for the technique.

The Taesan that Choi Jiyeon had manifested.

He had gathered some information. The unique abilities of the Three Great Clans were notoriously difficult to replicate, but not impossible.

If he could mimic Taesan, there was a chance.

In his third cycle, he had used three techniques.

Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan.

Although the unstable nature of the early cycles had been problematic, the output of those techniques had been comparable to what he achieved in the later cycles.

With those three techniques, he could kill the Twin-headed Venom Dragon in a single strike… leaving no room for survival.

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CHAPTER 155
THE THREE ENDS

In his third cycle, Lee Hayul did not die to the Master of The Tower.

At the time, the third cycle found him caught between the Three Great Clans, putting him in a rather troublesome situation.

Though it wasn't exactly as if an assassination order had been issued, he was still stuck in a difficult position, caught between the powers at play.

So, he decided to step away for a while.

There was still time before the Master of The Tower would invade, and he lacked the proficiency required to use the three unique abilities simultaneously.

Thus, he went to the African Demonic Realm, partly for training.

There, he fought a higher-ranked monster, engaging in battle to refine his skills.

And he died.

There were numerous reasons for this.

He had gotten into a prolonged brawl with an Alpha-ranked monster of the third rank and found himself surrounded by a swarm of monsters.

On top of that, he had snuck in without any backup, meaning he had to fight entirely on his own.

These were indirect causes.

The direct cause was that the three unique abilities he recklessly activated simultaneously clashed with each other.

The backlash occurred, and unable to control it, he died.

‘The Three Ends’ is fatal if used incorrectly.

As is often the case in the early cycles, it carried high risks and burdens.

‘It has to explode up close.’

He understood the danger.

Yet, he did not falter.

‘The Three Ends… there’s no time for practice. The same goes for Taesan. I must get close and detonate it on the first try.’

He could gauge the minimum power output.

If it detonated up close, it would surely kill.

The maximum? He didn’t know. All that mattered was that it could kill.

So, he approached, determined to ensure a lethal blow.

– Ssshhhh!

The venomous dragon, still recovering from its wounds, roared.

An overwhelming amount of mana was released. Half of it wrapped around the dragon like armor, while the other half turned into venom, oozing between its scales.

Then, it charged. The massive body of the dragon closed the distance in an instant.

Its jaws opened wide, and from its throat, rapid-fire mana beams shot out.

Though these were light attacks meant to suppress him, even they were more than enough to kill Lee Hayul outright.

Fear crept in, but he did not retreat.

He spread his wings. His wings stretched wide across the night sky, glowing with a myriad of colors.

The spirits residing in the wings of the sky moved according to his will.

A form of spirit merge, using the wings as a medium.

Though he had always found handling spirits easy, the pseudo-spirit merge state he was in made it even smoother and faster.

He flapped his wings.

The spirits of lightning and fire moved.

Flames burst forth, propelling him forward. Sparks danced along his wings, accelerating his body once more.

The fierce storm did not strike him. The wind spirit cleared the way ahead while pushing him from behind, swelling the flames with its force.

A barrage of mana beams rained down on him.

He could see all their trajectories. As long as his speed was up to par, he could dodge them all.

Unlike before, he didn't try to counterattack.

He simply weaved through the gaps in the attacks, flapping his wings.

Each attack missed him by the smallest margin.

Not a single shot from the hundreds of blasts hit him.

Crack! His body screamed in protest. Suddenly, patches of his skin turned black and decayed.

He had dodged all the attacks, and he had used every means at his disposal to expel the venom. Yet, trace amounts had still accumulated in his body, and it was approaching a dangerous threshold.

'……'

Fear welled up inside him.

But still, he did not back down.

He had come here to stop the resurrection of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon as an undead.

He had disrupted the Death Cult branch that was planning to raise the dragon through a necromantic ritual.

In the process, there had been no anticipation that the Twin-headed Venom Dragon would rise at this time.

Given what they knew, it should have been impossible.

They lacked the necessary sacrifices.

If they had enough, they wouldn't have left the branch vulnerable to being discovered.

They also hadn't gathered the byproducts of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon for the ritual.

He had already investigated. There were those secretly scrambling to collect the dragon's remains, but they hadn't succeeded yet.

So, performing the necromantic ritual immediately should have been impossible. No matter what tricks they pulled, the resurrection of the Twin-

headed Venom Dragon was not a possibility at this time.

Understanding this, he had come here to further delay the timing.

Despite all of that, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had been raised as an incomplete undead.

Countless lesser undead had also risen, causing the dungeon to go berserk.

This wasn't like the incident at Shipnaha.

Lee Hayul felt responsible for this mess.

That's why he couldn't retreat. It would be too shameful to flee after causing part of the problem, just to save his own skin.

The venomous dragon opened its jaws once more.

Crack! Its jaw split wide open, stretching far beyond what seemed natural.

An overwhelming premonition of mana.

The very hairs on his body stood on end.

A far more powerful mana beam than before surged from the overextended jaws.

'Space.'

Right in front of the dragon's maw, he conjured a spatial barrier.

Crack! A sharp pain shot through his head. His brain felt like it was going to turn to mush from the overuse of his powers.

The torrent of venom was blocked by the barrier, splashing back onto the dragon's own face.

– Sssssshhhh!

The dragon immediately recoiled. The space barrier was fixed in place. As the dragon moved its head, the venom cascaded down again.

In that brief moment, he closed the distance even further.

A wave of mana… and venom surged toward him.

Lee Hayul stretched out his left arm.

He recklessly poured mana into the prosthetic. A brilliant golden engraving on its surface glowed intensely.

‘Power manifestation, Protection.’

A borrowed power from an external source.

The most famous example of a borrowed power is the Power of the Tower, but top-tier artifacts can also possess high-level abilities of their own.

Once connected, they provide information. He didn’t know everything about it yet, but he could immediately manifest basic functions.

The Proof of Protection activated. Mana gathered at his shoulder, condensing into what felt like armor.

Simultaneously, a golden barrier formed around him, shielding his entire body. He flapped his wings again, accelerating.

‘Closer, closer.’

He performed aerial acrobatics, using the barrier as a shield to close the distance. He employed every defensive technique he could to protect himself from the venom.

The golden barrier gradually began to melt. Dozens of defensive spells were torn apart. The thick layer of Qi he had surrounded himself with began to degrade and scatter.

He was being poisoned.

His skin was necrotizing.

Dark blood oozed from his seven orifices. Gritting his teeth, he flew straight toward the dragon's head.

'I've reached it.'

He was within range.

His vision blurred.

He opened his eyes again. His unpleasant gray pupils were now partially tinged with dark green.

A thick fog obscured his sight. In the corner of his vision, status windows were updating.

And beyond it, he saw darkness—a darkness he had once witnessed at Shipnaha.

Grinding his teeth, he pushed his mana to its limit. His mana core trembled as if it would shatter from the strain, pouring out every ounce of energy.

'Homogenization: Gop-hwa.'

The nature of his mana began to change.

From his right arm, flames of Gop-hwa burst forth. His emotions swelled. He didn't allow the fiery energy to spread throughout his body and instead concentrated it in his right hand.

'Homogenization: Changhae.'

While still manifesting Gop-hwa, he invoked Changhae.

Crack! The fiery energy of Gop-hwa clashed with the cold power of Changhae

inside his body. His internal organs alternated between burning hot and freezing cold. His heightened emotions subsided, only to spike again.

His body creaked. His insides were being crushed. His mind grew hazier.

The backlash.

Like a unicorn and a bicorn colliding, like light and darkness consuming each other.

Gop-hwa and Changhae clashed violently, causing a backlash. If the backlash became too severe, his body could collapse.

But it wasn't entirely a bad thing. If he could harness the power generated by the backlash, he could push his output beyond what was normally possible.

However, it wasn't just about backlash—there was also a synergy effect.

Gop-hwa evaporated Changhae, and Changhae extinguished Gop-hwa.

In other words…

Gop-hwa could melt the icy Changhae, and Changhae could calm the ever-consuming flames of Gop-hwa.

The same principle applied to Taesan.

They influenced each other. In the process, there was both the repelling backlash and the enhancing synergy.

The third cycle's "Three Ends" maximized both the backlash and the synergy.

'Homogenization… '

He pushed his mana even further. He had closely observed how Choi Jiyeon's Taesan manifested. Now, he imitated it.

'Taesan.'

His mana transformed into something akin to the nature of earth. Though he wasn't standing on solid ground, he felt as though he were somehow more connected to the earth.

'Huh…?'

His perception shifted.

Lee Hayul's mouth opened slightly.

Not only were his seven orifices bleeding, but now his skin cracked, and dark blood seeped from his body. His circuits ruptured. His senses dulled further.

He wasn't shocked by this.

Lee Hayul could feel the vitality of the earth beneath him. Even as he lay dying from the poison, he could sense the life force emanating from the ground.

There was nothing like that near the undead creature, which was spewing venom nearby. The dead, the lifeless, did not possess life force.

But within himself… there was a life force, albeit faint compared to that of the venomous dragon.

'…… '

Without stopping, Lee Hayul continued to manipulate his mana.

He forced the energies of Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan into his right hand.

– Crack!

His right arm twisted. Like a beast thrashing in a trap, his arm contorted unnaturally, bulging grotesquely.

The energies collided.

Gop-hwa pushed against Changhae. Changhae resisted Taesan. Taesan, in turn, pushed back against Gop-hwa.

And then…

Changhae calmed Gop-hwa, while Gop-hwa was fueled by Taesan's life force. Taesan sprouted life, nourished by Changhae's water energy.

They repelled each other and enhanced each other. The energies amplified endlessly.

At the tip of his right hand, the three energies intertwined and coalesced into a single point. It was no larger than a fingernail.

From that tiny ball of energy, the venomous dragon, sensing the unprecedented danger, widened its eyes.

Before the dragon could react, Lee Hayul, with the last of his strength, released the condensed energy forward.

The Three Ends.

The energy that had been twisting and compressing unraveled.

The previously chaotic blend of colors turned black, consuming everything around it.

The massive body of the venomous dragon was swallowed by the black sphere.

The sphere continued to expand, seemingly without end.

There was no explosion.

In the blink of an eye, the energy expanded, engulfing the entire area and violently absorbing everything around it.

Dirt, rocks, air, clouds, venom—nothing was spared from being sucked into the void.

Anything that got caught in it would leave no trace behind—not even pieces of a corpse.

Lee Hayul's body swayed weakly. He was swept into the current.

His wings flapped erratically, resisting the pull of the torrent.

The spirits struggled to maintain his wings, trying desperately to protect their master.

But it was only for a moment.

One by one, the spirits slipped away from the wings of the sky. As his consciousness faded, the spirit merge began to unravel.

'Mani… festation… Space… '

Just before he was swallowed by the void.

Lee Hayul barely managed to manifest spatial teleportation. A vortex of space appeared in midair, swallowing him whole.

The coordinates distorted.

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Above the misty surface of a lake, a sudden rift tore through the air.

Crack—splitting open on both sides, a figure fell from the dark void.

– Splash.

The limp body of Lee Hayul plunged into the lake.

A large ripple spread out, sending yellow leaves floating across the water's surface.

Moments later, the surface of the lake returned to stillness.

– Bubble, bubble…

Instead, bubbles rose to the surface. Sinking to the bottom, Lee Hayul did not resurface.

The Lake of Mana.

The water here was rich with pure mana, something rarely found anywhere else.

The lake water seeped into Lee Hayul's countless wounds, replacing his blood as it circulated through his body.

Gurgle… The surface of the lake gradually lowered.

His hair turned white.

* * *

[Savior Adjustment System: Pioneer Mode]

[Quest [Twin-headed Venom Dragon] complete.]

[Quest [Demonic Realm of China] partially complete.]

[A large number of points have been awarded.]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Redemption Mode]

[Confirming the results of your act of salvation, performed with goodwill.]

[A large number of points have been awarded.]

…

[The [Curse of Unlucky Beauty] has been activated.]

[Expended life force is restoring the body.]

[…A significant portion of the body has been lost.]

[Immediate recovery is impossible.]

[The body is shrinking.]

…

[The Master of The Tower of Growth weeps as the power [Growth] is manifested.]

[The body of the savior is growing.]

[A large number of points are being consumed.]

…

[The Master of The Tower of Harmony is shocked as the power [Harmony] is manifested.]

[The savior's body is being harmonized with the power of growth.]

[A large number of points are being consumed.]

.

CHAPTER 156
ANOTHER RUINOUS REGRET?

“Th-thank you! Thank you, hero…!”

A disheveled civilian expressed his gratitude before hastily fleeing the scene.

It was clear at a glance that he was terrified, running away without even looking back.

Choi Jiyeon didn’t feel any discomfort from the reaction.

In fact, she understood that it was only natural.

-Slice!

A head was severed by a downward strike of her axe. Blood gushed from the clean-cut neck like a stream flowing from a ravine.

The now headless body staggered for a moment before collapsing to one side.

The chunk of meat fell into the pool of blood. Choi Jiyeon reached out toward the fallen corpse.

Thud!

The cold, lifeless mass twitched.

The body, which had lost its head, jerked momentarily before suddenly standing up again.

The headless body fumbled for a while, as if searching for something, before finding the severed head and reattaching it to the neck.

The clean-cut surfaces met perfectly. Like stitches in a surgery, the head and body fused together.

Necromancy.

Through a ritual, the undead Choi Jiyeon resurrected began to stomp the ground, charging toward the rampaging monsters and undead.

Using this method, she increased the number of undead, exterminating the nearby monsters.

“Huu…”

After completing the ritual for hundreds of undead, Choi Jiyeon paused for a moment to catch her breath and looked around.

This area… even calling it a disaster zone would be an understatement.

A countless number of undead, raised by mad necromancers acting in unison.

As a result, one dungeon after another was going berserk, collapsing and spewing out monsters.

The monsters of the gray area, which had been living there peacefully, were now rampaging, swept up in the chaos.

Superhumans were struggling to subdue the monsters, while civilians resisted with firearms.

At least in areas without civilians, they could just leave the monsters to tear each other apart.

That could potentially lead to the emergence of dangerous mutants, but for now, it wasn’t something to worry about.

The civilian zones were what mattered.

-Please help the civilians.

Suddenly, a blunt voice echoed in her mind.

Lee Hayul. That boy who, deep inside the dungeon… appeared to be performing some sort of purification ritual.

-There are still many people who haven't evacuated yet.

His calm demeanor stood out. Even while knowing that a horrifying monster was chasing him, he remained indifferent, worrying about the civilians.

-There are many dungeons going berserk due to the influence of the undead.

Of course, it wasn't his real voice, but an artificially generated one through an artifact.

-There are many people you can save, Senior.

Still… even though he was in a perilous situation, he was concerned for the civilians and sent Choi Jiyeon away to help them.

The junior she once held petty jealousy toward… was worried about the civilians and Choi Jiyeon's safety.

Choi Jiyeon couldn't find the right words and simply walked away.

Leaving her junior behind, who was being chased by the monster.

That, in particular… no, it weighed heavily on her mind, plaguing her with intense guilt ever since.

'Should I… go back now?'

Her chest felt like it was about to burst from the frustration.

Choi Jiyeon bit her lip and turned her head. Far off in the distance, her junior was likely still being chased by the monster, without her help.

There was a reason she had left initially.

At the time, Lee Hayul had been splitting his strength to support both himself and Choi Jiyeon. By separating from him, escaping would become much easier.

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon had lost interest in Choi Jiyeon. It had been chasing her with murderous intent earlier, but after Lee Hayul appeared, it focused solely on him.

Lee Hayul had many means of survival.

Despite Choi Jiyeon's assistance, he had been fleeing quite skillfully… with terrifying detection abilities and even mastering spatial magic.

If things truly became dangerous, he could escape with spatial magic.

Choi Jiyeon was a manifestation of Taesan.

With her control over the earth, she could easily crush large numbers of lesser monsters.

She could administer first aid with the manipulation of life force and raise armies of undead to save more civilians across a wider area.

Given the current turmoil caused by rampaging monsters and undead over a wide range, it was only logical that a large-scale necromancer like Choi Jiyeon would be the best suited to manage the situation.

With that reasoning, she left.

-I'm fine.

Lee Hayul… her junior had reassured her.

-Don't worry.

-I won't die.

-Trust me.

He told her not to worry, that he wouldn't die, and to trust him.

So, after making her own judgment, Choi Jiyeon…

'…Really?'

Choi Jiyeon, who had been saving civilians while creating new undead from the monsters and undead she had killed, suddenly began to doubt herself.

'Did I really leave after making a rational decision?'

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon. Even though it had become considerably weaker after being turned into an undead, it was still a formidable foe.

Just from being chased by it for a short time, Choi Jiyeon had nearly lost her life.

She had felt it firsthand.

Even in its degraded state, the speed of the serpent was impossible to shake off. The impact from just one hit had made her feel as though her body would shatter.

Even Choi Jiyeon, with her manifestation of Taesan—confident in her defense, stamina, and resistance—had felt the deadly venom threatening to end her life the moment it made contact.

She was afraid. She was terrified of dying. She didn't want to die in a place like that.

She had wanted to run away. Wasn't she already in the midst of doing just that?

And in the middle of all that, her younger junior had paved the way for her escape.

'Leave it to me,' he had said. 'Please, go save the others… '

With those comforting words, he opened the path for her escape.

Had she, relieved by his words, selfishly taken them at face value and fled on her own?

Had she seized the opportunity to flee, turning her back without a second thought because she had secretly wanted to run away?

'I… '

She couldn't confidently deny it.

Choi Jiyeon had always been a coward, ever since she was young.

Whenever she felt a vague fear of the unknown, her body would freeze. She would act slowly, and even thinking things through took her a long time.

She was nothing like the ever-confident Hong Yeon-hwa, who always stepped forward boldly.

Choi Jiyeon had no special talents.

Whenever she encountered a problem, no matter how long she wrestled with it, solving it had always been a painful struggle.

She was nothing like Baek Ahrin, who would step back humbly at first, then sneak up with a smile and easily fix everything like it was nothing.

Choi Jiyeon had manifested Taesan.

It was a Taesan with an output strong enough to rank among the top even in her clan's history.

-Have you heard the news? Lady Hong Yeon-hwa, they say she completely melted the testing device.

-I heard she manifested Gop-hwa, but… what? Come on, don't joke. You're telling me a five-year-old girl did what even current military units struggle with?

-No, really! She's shaking the world. People are saying she must have trained in secret somewhere!

Hong Yeon-hwa had manifested Gop-hwa.

The output was unprecedented in the clan's history.

-And now it's Changhae's child? This is a double celebration.

-Apparently, she can freely manipulate both water and cold energy. The output is incredible too… especially her cold energy. I heard she froze Han Iron, which was specially alloyed for her!

-Froze Han Iron…? That's absurd. Isn't she just five? What will happen when she grows up?

Baek Ahrin had manifested Changhae. Specializing in cold energy, her output was also unparalleled in history.

But her control over water energy was just as remarkable.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

Younger sisters, with whom she had often met and played.

Though only a year younger than her, they were praised as the greatest talents in the clan's history, even being hailed as the reincarnation of the clan's ancestors.

Choi Jiyeon wasn't like that.

She had manifested a powerful Taesan, but not something unprecedented or worthy of being called the reincarnation of their ancestors.

'……'

-And Miss Choi Jiyeon…

And then there was her, always mentioned afterward.

The same generation. Only a one-year difference. They were all children of the clan head, and they had spent so much time together that people couldn't help but make comparisons.

There had been faint expectations.

Followed by slight disappointment.

Though those emotions had eventually faded, Choi Jiyeon had clearly felt them. She couldn't forget.

-What? How do you dodge it? Oh… you just, um, avoid it by watching how it moves?

The pure, innocent gaze of Hong Yeon-hwa, tilting her head, wondering why Choi Jiyeon couldn't do the same.

-Qi… I just activate it the way I was taught. Didn't you learn it the same way, Jiyeon Unnie?

Baek Ahrin's slightly awkward expression, actively trying to help, but unsure of how to explain it properly.

Choi Jiyeon, as a child, could never forget.

How foolish of her to harbor jealousy.

She had harbored such ugly envy toward her younger sisters, who had

nothing but goodwill and affection toward her.

It had become difficult to enjoy their company at some point.

And it wasn't just in the past.

Even now, she couldn't shake it off. Slowly, naturally, their meetings became less frequent, and their relationships grew distant.

It was a spoiled feeling.

If people in this world were ranked from the top down based on talent, Choi Jiyeon would undoubtedly be near the very top.

She was born into a prestigious clan, part of the direct lineage of the ancestors, and the eldest daughter of the current clan head.

Her unique ability was the manifestation of Taesan, and its output was impressive. The clan provided her with ample, even overwhelming, support.

The records left behind by her ancestors were plentiful, and there were many teachers to kindly interpret and teach her those lessons.

She had warmth, food, and plenty of leisure, yet here she was, whining.

The pathetic emotions of a weak person.

Realizing this, Choi Jiyeon felt even more wretched.

Even now, as she acknowledged her own pitiful nature.

Choi Jiyeon gritted her teeth and summoned her magical power. She drew an enormous amount of power, nearly to the point of depleting her core, and released her preserved undead in all directions.

Her head throbbed instantly. The sudden consumption of so much magical power made her vision blur.

The farther the undead traveled, the harder it was to control them precisely, but the basic order to leave humans alone and only kill monsters and other undead was absolute.

'As expected, I should go back.'

No matter how she looked at it, rejoining Lee Hayul was the right course of action.

The surrounding rescue efforts were almost complete. Beyond this area of operations, it was more efficient to leave the undead in charge.

She had used up a significant amount of energy and still had some injuries, but nothing that would hinder her.

She should reunite with Lee Hayul and help him buy more time.

With that thought, she turned to leave.

"Huh?"

In the distance, she saw a black sphere.

It was far away, yet its size was significant. Moreover, the energy radiating from the black sphere felt terribly familiar.

'…Wait a minute.'

Before she could even dwell on what it meant, Choi Jiyeon shuddered.

That direction… it was where Lee Hayul had been luring the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

A horrible thought crept into her mind.

"No."

Whether she was speaking to herself or someone else, she voiced her denial

aloud and immediately dashed forward.

The black sphere began to shrink, disappearing. Choi Jiyeon rushed frantically.

She sensed venom in the air. If she stayed here too long, she'd be poisoned, and her life would be in danger.

Choi Jiyeon surrounded herself in armor of rock and reinforced it with Qi to block the venom.

She manifested Taesan, increasing her resistance, and continued running.

The sight of the earth dying from exposure to the deadly toxin came into view.

Burn marks, fire, explosions, and what looked like the aftermath of winds carving through the land.

The traces of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon were clearly visible.

It looked as though a building-sized snake had slithered through the area, leaving an unmistakable trail behind.

She followed the trail, running as fast as she could.

And then—

"…Ah."

Choi Jiyeon came across a large crater.

A crater so vast that it could comfortably fit an entire village within it.

The familiar energy emanating from it… was irrelevant.

She scanned the surroundings.

The area around the crater wasn't in good shape either. The ground had not only been upheaved but seemed to have been obliterated, as if completely wiped away.

The traces of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon ended at the crater.

"…Junior."

She looked around.

There was no sign of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

Nor were there any signs of the one who had been luring it.

"Junior…?"

Her trembling voice echoed, but no response came. There wasn't even a trace of him.

She manifested Taesan, blending with the earth to extend her senses.

She reached out to feel the vibrancy of life… to sense everything that came into contact with the ground.

Nothing.

She pushed her senses beyond their limit.

Her vision turned red. Blood tears trickled down her face.

Ignoring the pain, she pushed her senses even further.

But among all the information she gathered, there was no trace of Lee Hayul.

The worst-case scenario, the one she had been desperately pushing away, floated to the surface.

"…That… can't be…"

-Did you think I did this because I wanted to die?

Suddenly, she remembered what he had said.

It wasn't something a boy who had been so focused on protecting civilians and leading Choi Jiyeon to safety should have said.

Choi Jiyeon's vision darkened.

Despair and self-loathing filled her eyes.

* * *

My head hurt.

It felt like someone was repeatedly smashing my skull with a giant sledgehammer. My brain felt like it was being crushed into mush, and my skull seemed ready to shatter into pieces.

I gritted my teeth, trying to activate my power…

'Ugh… ngh… aah… '

The moment I tried to activate the Power of Observation, the pain doubled.

I felt as though my brain might physically melt.

Sensing my consciousness turning white, I stopped trying to manifest my power.

'Urgh… '

I clamped my mouth shut, stifling any screams, and curled up tightly. I didn't know where I was. Judging from the ground, I assumed I was lying on the floor.

It didn't seem like the coordinates I had previously set.

Did I fail to teleport? Why? I had calculated the coordinates in advance; how could they be off?

'Ugh… '

Not just my head—my entire body hurt.

And something felt strange about my body.

A sense of discomfort covered me from head to toe, something difficult to explain.

What was this feeling?

How should I describe it?

It was as if…

As if…

Through the sensations transmitted to me, I began to feel like the world had grown larger.

* * *

[The body is being reconstructed.]

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CHAPTER 157
A TROUBLESOME CRYBABY (1)

[Hua-Bei and Dong-Bei Border, Necromancers' Group Terror Incident]

[Emergency Level 4 Evacuation Order Issued for Surrounding Areas – Is the Gray Zone Dangerous Again?]

[Concerns Over Dungeon Chain Reaction… Association Vows 'Swift Suppression']

* * *

The old land of China.

A region that once belonged to a vanished nation, now a place where even the World Superhuman Association has only a few branches established.

Yet, even such a remote location still had people living in it.

Though the population wasn't the massive number it once boasted, native residents who had no realistic means to relocate still remained.

Additionally, due to its desolate nature, the region had become a hunting ground for a small number of hunters and heroes, as it was abundant in dungeons and monsters.

And now, a terrorist attack had occurred in such an area.

A group of deranged necromancers reportedly rose in rebellion, leading to a massacre.

Even civilians casually browsing the internet were left speechless by the news that suddenly appeared at the top of the headlines.

The unexpected incident made the world tremble.

[Will the Nightmare of a Fallen Nation Return? Twin-headed Venom Dragon Observed in Undead Form, Says Surveillance Unit]

[Association Raises Evacuation Order: From Level 4 to Level 2 in Nearby Areas, Declares Level 3 Evacuation for Other Border Zones]

[Prompt Emergency Declaration, Association Plans 'Swift Subjugation in Cooperation with Nearby Forces']

Correction.

The world was turned upside down.

Already suffering from a series of brutal events over the past few months, the global economy, which had been in decline, took a nosedive.

The organizations promoting the redevelopment of the Gray Zone, including China, saw their economic indicators crash hard.

During the period of chaos that followed the Great Cataclysm, many nations had fallen.

There had been many high-level monsters that contributed to the collapse of nations.

But the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was not a monster that appeared during those chaotic early days.

It had risen during the period when the chaos was beginning to subside, as heroes started to emerge one after another. It was a time when peace was cautiously starting to peek out here and there.

And just as people were starting to talk about peace, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, which emerged in the dragon-worshipping region of China, forcibly shut the mouths of those who dared to speak of peace too soon.

From one head, waves of deadly poison were unleashed, killing both living and non-living creatures alike.

From the other head, a mist carrying disease spread for hundreds of miles.

With its massive body, it crushed cities underfoot, and from its twin heads poured death in the form of liquid and smoke.

There are still many survivors who suffer from trauma after witnessing the devastation.

Was it only China that suffered?

The disease spread by the Twin-headed Venom Dragon devastated China beyond repair and caused horrific damage to nearby regions as well.

It became a terrifying monster that left an indelible scar.

Even though it had weakened after becoming undead, its poison and disease were still enough to terrify those who had survived its previous attack.

This wasn't just a matter for idle discussion—it was a situation that made many foam at the mouth and faint in terror.

The reports continued.

[Breaking News: Surveillance Unit Confirms Twin-headed Venom Dragon Has Been Destroyed]

[80% of Rampaging Necromancers' Forces Eradicated, Ongoing Subjugation of Remaining Monsters and Undead]

[Only One Hour Since the Incident Began…]

The world trembled once more.

The undead Twin-headed Venom Dragon. It had been defeated in roughly

one hour.

Almost 70% of the undead forces rampaging across China had been wiped out in a single blow. Why? The reason was still under investigation… but at least it wasn't entirely hopeless news.

Those who had fainted in terror opened their eyes wide, glued to the media.

[Breaking News: Hero Lee Hayul Credited with Subjugating the Twin-headed Venom Dragon]

And at the mention of one name, their eyes bulged even further—almost impossibly wide.

Lee Hayul. A name and surname that occasionally appeared on the news.

He had stirred up a commotion during his admission to Shio-ram, and the whole world had been in chaos during the Shipnaha incident when buildings collapsed.

And now, this figure had single-handedly destroyed the reemergent Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

The once terrifying news was swiftly overtaken by a glimmer of hope…

[Breaking News: Hero Lee Hayul Missing…]

[The Association's Search Party 'Shadow Squad' Immediately Dispatched]

The Association was in turmoil.

The upper echelons… It wasn't just any high-ranking official who had gone missing. A 'VIP of Absolute Priority'—more important than even the central representatives—was now missing after engaging a high-level monster.

[Gop-hwa Clan Dispatches Purification Squad to Hua-Bei and Dong-Bei Border]

The Gop-hwa Clan was in turmoil too. Perhaps even more so than the Association.

Lee Hayul had not only drawn but entirely colored the Fenghuo Sword of their ancient founder.

Even the Gop-hwa Council, who had been smiling while discussing how to handle Lee Hayul and what the future held for the clan, were now in disarray.

Even Choi Jiyeon, who had been managing a mountain of paperwork with a sense of relief that her daughter had already sealed the engagement, was thrown into chaos when she learned her future son-in-law had gone missing.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been struggling with her duties as the next successor, fainted in shock, her eyes rolling back.

[Changhae Clan Deploys Forces to the Front, Declares 'Mission to Rescue the Hero']

The Changhae Clan was also in an uproar.

They were already on edge, as the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had appeared in a neighboring region. Now, their successor had stepped forward to take the lead in the search for Lee Hayul.

[Taesan Clan Declares "A Great Threat to Humanity's Survival," Deploys Forces for Crisis Management]

The Taesan Clan was also in a state of emergency. Even though they weren't directly tied to Lee Hayul, their precious successor and their formidable combat unit had been drawn into the chaos.

All sorts of factions, each driven by their own reasons, had gathered on Chinese soil because of the trouble stirred up by this unpredictable child.

* * *

The method of using a power varies for each individual.

The Power of Observation consumes very little mana.

If the technique is modified, it will consume mana, but when used in the standard way, it primarily uses mental energy rather than mana.

The Power of Space, on the other hand, consumes a lot of mana.

Simply opening subspaces doesn't consume much.

However, the process of building, tearing, and connecting the walls of space consumes an immense amount of mana and also drains significant amounts of mental energy.

Whatever the case, the use of powers always consumes mental strength.

'I can't see… '

In other words, if mental strength is insufficient, powers cannot be activated.

That's why the world appeared pitch black before me.

Even when I opened my eyes, a misty fog greeted me, and when I closed them, all I saw was a dull blackness.

There is, of course, a technique for such situations.

It's called echo-location—a technique to perceive the surroundings by sharpening one's senses.

I had used this method in The Tower of Growth, but now, even that wasn't working very well.

The world felt much larger than before… or maybe I had somehow shrunk.

I wiggled my fingers experimentally. They felt thinner and more delicate than before.

The clothes I had been wearing also felt oversized. Since they had become a grotesque mess soaked in venom, I had discarded them nearby and crawled away from the spot.

What was covering me now were the Wings of the Sky.

For some reason, the wings that were still attached to my back had wrapped around me protectively, shielding my body like a cocoon.

The wings seemed enormous. They could wrap around me multiple times.

'…Did I shrink? I'm not sure… '

I was confused about whether the sensations I was feeling were real.

'Ugh… '

My body hurt.

It ached as though I had been beaten all day, and it stung as though I had been slashed by blades.

Many other sensations came to mind, but the main point was that my body was in a lot of pain.

It hurt in multiple ways.

First… my body felt hot.

It felt like I had swallowed fire, and the flames were now sitting in my stomach.

The blood circulating through my veins felt like boiling oil, and the small amounts of mana trickling through my damaged circuits felt like flames.

It felt as though my entire body might burst into flames at any moment.

And then…

‘I’m cold… ’

Contradictorily, my body was also cold.

My hands and feet felt like they were frozen, as though they might shatter at any moment. I curled up into a ball.

Occasionally, when my body felt like it was melting from the heat, it would suddenly freeze again, as if turning into solid ice.

At times, I felt as though my body was hardening, ready to return to the earth as a pile of dirt.

That’s when I realized what these symptoms were.

‘Tri… Triple Resonance… ’

Triple Resonance. The technique that forcibly combines the powers of Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan. These were the side effects.

‘…Ugh… ’

Perhaps due to these side effects, my emotions kept fluctuating.

Sometimes, my emotions would surge, likely influenced by Gop-hwa.

The whole world felt hateful. I felt pitiful, crawling around in some unknown place in a ragged state, and I couldn’t hold back the tears.

I felt lonely. The fear of dying alone in a desolate place, the terror that I might die even if I managed to survive… it was overwhelming.

And then, perhaps affected by Changhae, my emotions would suddenly calm.

Not that it mattered, since everyone is a stranger anyway. Who could I hate? The pain didn’t matter since I was on the verge of death anyway. If I died, all my connections would end. Maybe it would be better to just die and be free

from this suffering…

My body was a wreck, and my mind was in just as bad of a state, continuously melting and freezing over.

I would lose consciousness and then regain it.

…

…

I had no idea how many days had passed.

Fortunately, I hadn't died yet.

I was starving, my stomach practically glued to my back from hunger, but I hadn't died of starvation yet.

I had been used to going hungry for long periods even in the previous world, and now that I was a superhuman, I expected to last even longer.

For water… I had been licking the damp ground, which seemed to retain some moisture.

The only small comfort in all of this was that my sense of taste had been dulled.

Over time, my mental strength had slowly begun to recover, and the side effects of the Triple Resonance were gradually lessening.

If I waited a few more days, I would likely shake off the side effects and be able to use my powers again.

-Bzzzz!

That's when it happened.

A sharp jolt ran through my senses. Without needing to expend mana or

mental strength, I could feel the vibrations of space striking my skin.

'…What is this? Where am I that space itself is…?'

I had no idea.

A sudden sense of danger welled up inside me.

In this wretched state, if a monster were to find me now…

A wave of terror washed over me, the fear of imminent death rising sharply.

Whatever it was, staying still would only lead to disaster.

I tried moving my limbs. Strength wasn't returning to my body easily.

I couldn't even crawl, let alone stand up.

'Urgh… '

I wiggled my body, inching slowly across the ground like some sort of insect.

I was cautiously moving away from the area where I had sensed the spatial disturbance when…

"Finally found…?!… you?"

At the familiar voice, I froze.

The mana signature and the comforting voice…

It was Professor Liana's presence.

'Is it an illusion?'

My first instinct was to doubt my senses. Was I dreaming? Had I passed out and was now dreaming of being rescued?

The thought crossed my mind.

I desperately hoped it wasn't an illusion. That would be far too cruel and heartbreaking.

"…Lee Hayul…"

The presence I assumed to be Professor Liana's hastened toward me, and with a few words and a chant, a warm energy settled over my body.

It was healing magic.

The moment I felt it, reality clicked back into place.

I didn't know how she had found me, but there was no doubt—it was truly Professor Liana.

The tension in my body instantly evaporated.

"Ah, ahh! Wait! You shouldn't lose consciousness just yet! Cadet Lee Hayul!"

As I slumped down fully, Professor Liana panicked and gently lifted me into her arms.

Her kind hands supported my body… wait.

'What the… '

An overwhelming sense of wrongness practically exploded inside me. The sensation couldn't be brushed off as a mere illusion.

Her hands, which slipped under my armpits to lift me, supporting my back and bottom, felt far too large.

It was as if a giant were handling me. In comparison, my body felt diminutive.

I fit snugly in her arms, more so than I ever had before—almost completely

enveloped.

“What is this… A baby? Cadet Lee Hayul… is that really you?”

Professor Liana asked in confusion.

‘……’

Her question snapped everything into place—my memories and the overwhelming sense of wrongness that had been plaguing me fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

The sensation of the world seeming larger… the feeling that my body had shrunk.

Professor Liana’s hands, which felt like those of a giant, and the fact that I fit so comfortably into her embrace, far more so than before.

‘…Did I shrink?’

My body had become smaller. No, more accurately, I had reverted to a younger state.

The moment I reached that conclusion, my mind froze.

“Oh dear… What in the world… No, let’s start with a nutrient supplement.”

Whether I had frozen or not, Professor Liana frowned as she inspected my left arm—the Proof of Protection, which had also shrunk to match my younger body—and then she pulled something out and gently pressed it to my mouth.

A bottle, or what I assumed to be a bottle, tilted slightly, allowing lukewarm liquid to trickle into my mouth.

My body, worn from exhaustion, gradually relaxed. It must have been some kind of energy-restoring potion.

I obediently drank it down, swallowing the liquid she fed me.

The sensation was… strange.

Once the potion was finished, I felt an odd sense of disappointment.

'…?'

Suddenly, I became aware of something repeatedly brushing against my face.

[Soft]

[Gentle]

[Warm]

It was soft. So soft that my head practically sank into it. It radiated a gentle warmth.

Instinctively, I burrowed my face deeper into it. The comfort and warmth enveloped me completely, filling me with a sense of peace.

"It's okay. You've done well surviving on your own, haven't you? Don't worry. Now that I'm here, everything will be alright…"

As if to affirm my actions, she began stroking my head and back. The gentle touch filled me with happiness.

I was currently nuzzling into a woman's chest. An area that should not be touched so recklessly—a very important part of her body.

But it was so incredibly soft and warm…

'……'

My hands moved on their own.

"You've done well. Now let's—"

-Squeeze…

"—go, huh…?!"

A sense of bliss filled my grasp.

* * *

[Player Support System: Affection Meter]

Lee Hayul → Liana Velus

[●●●●●●●○○○ (66▸71/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Kind Adult] [Softness] [Warmth]

…

[Player Support System: Mental State]

…

▸ Current Mental Condition

[Loneliness]

[Desire for Warmth]

[Desire for Affection]

[Mental Fatigue]

[Emotional Elevation]

[Emotional Decline]

[Emotional Neutrality]

CHAPTER 158
A TROUBLESOME CRYBABY (2)

Spirit Arts.

The number of practitioners may be exceedingly rare, but once mastered, spirit users can command a veritable army of spirits.

These spirits, when scattered, exhibit exceptional search capabilities, easily surpassing ordinary detection abilities.

That's why Liana also participated in the search.

Of course, no one forced her—Liana volunteered herself.

Even Shio-ram was in chaos after the news of Lee Hayul's disappearance.

For Atra, who had been personally teaching him, and for Liana, his supervising professor, the news hit like a bolt of lightning out of the blue.

Especially Atra…

"Oh, oh dear…"

It had taken everything just to calm her down.

Although Liana was shocked too, Atra had completely lost it, foaming at the mouth in a fit of panic.

After finally calming Atra down, Liana made her way to China and began the search.

The lands of China were vast. Even for someone with exceptional detection abilities like Liana, who commanded an enormous number of spirits, the

task of searching the entire region was daunting.

But there was no need to search everywhere.

The location had already been narrowed down.

Near the Hua-Bei–Dong-Bei border, the place where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had been defeated had been identified.

There was also the testimony of Choi Jiyeon, the heir of Taesan, who had fought alongside Lee Hayul against the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

Though physically unharmed, she had suffered significant mental trauma and wasn't entirely in her right mind, but she had provided information about the dungeon Lee Hayul had entered just before losing consciousness.

Liana scattered her spirits and meticulously combed through the area.

Soon, she found something resembling the dungeon entrance that Choi Jiyeon had mentioned.

Although there was no mist as described in the testimony, Liana found the entrance in a cave set in the middle of a cliff.

For some reason, she couldn't enter the dungeon at first, but after a few days, she discovered that the entrance had opened and immediately ventured inside.

The interior of the dungeon was slightly different from what had been reported.

The testimony had mentioned a thick mist… but, contrary to that, the space inside was clear with no mist in sight.

There had also been a mention of a faintly glowing, dream-like lake… but that too was different.

There were traces of where a lake once stood, but the water had vanished, leaving only a gaping pit behind.

And in the center of that pit was a small, white figure.

The moment Liana saw it, her thoughts froze.

Even Liana, who had seen many strange things, found herself standing there, mouth agape, stunned by the mysterious aura the child gave off.

The child had pure white hair, without a trace of impurity, and skin that retained a healthy flush despite being covered in dust.

Its body, too small for the enormous, glistening blue wings it used as a blanket, was curling on the ground, inching forward with quiet grunts.

A child… It looked almost like the fairies Liana had seen before.

But calling it 'almost' felt strange.

To Liana, there was no avoiding it—this was a fairy.

It had undergone a dramatic transformation… but there were too many similarities to Lee Hayul.

Most notably, those wings were the same artifact that Lee Hayul had worn.

Why there was a small prosthetic arm fitted perfectly to its tiny body was beyond her…?

'Wait, isn't that an artifact?'

And not just any artifact—a high-grade one at that, from the looks of it.

…In any case, this child was Lee Hayul.

Liana rushed over to Lee Hayul and took the proper procedural steps.

She checked his consciousness, removed the filthy, tattered rags that couldn't even be used as a mop, and wrapped him in a soft blanket.

She also performed basic first aid using healing magic.

Next, she carefully fed him a stamina recovery potion that wouldn't burden his weakened body.

And then…

"You've endured well. Now, let's get out of here—"

-Squeeze…

"—Wait. Haah…?!"

Her chest was grabbed.

.

.

.

Liana clamped her mouth shut.

Setting aside the embarrassing gasp that had slipped out, the strange sensation running down her spine caused her to straighten her back involuntarily.

It was a feeling hard to describe.

Liana glanced down.

Her chest came into view. Her feet, as usual, did not.

What she did see was a mop of white hair.

The child-like Lee Hayul had buried his face into Liana's chest, as if seeking comfort.

It made sense.

Liana had always known that despite pretending otherwise, Lee Hayul was a rather clingy child.

And this child had been isolated in this dungeon for days on end.

His body had regressed, leaving him barely able to move… He had been crawling across the ground, struggling to survive.

In a place where it would have been nearly impossible to find proper food, it was no surprise that his mind and body were completely exhausted.

Just as expected, Lee Hayul, whimpering, squirmed deeper into Liana's embrace.

And so, without thinking much of it, she opened her arms to him. She hugged him tightly, letting him feel her warmth, and gently patted his head and back to reassure him.

In all this, she hadn't expected him to grab her chest.

-Squeeze…

"J-just a moment… Cadet Lee Hayul…?"

Lee Hayul continued to knead her chest.

She belatedly noticed that his previously burned hand had healed.

Of course, his hand was still quite small compared to her chest, and his tiny fingers sank into her soft flesh.

Little bits of skin spilled from between his chubby fingers as they squeezed.

The sight of it… coupled with the unfamiliar sensation from her chest, caused Liana's face to flush with heat.

It was a scene she had never imagined.

Never in her life had she thought her chest would be touched so openly by someone else.

Panicking, she hurriedly removed the small hand kneading her chest, being careful not to hurt him.

"You, you… shouldn't just touch a woman's chest as you please…"

She attempted a clumsy reprimand.

Liana had never raised a child before. Naturally, she had no idea how to properly scold one for misbehavior.

Of course, Lee Hayul wasn't actually a child, but considering his upbringing and his current physical condition, he might as well be one.

She poked his nose as if to admonish him, forcing herself to speak in a firm tone.

-Hmph…

[Don't want…]

At her feeble attempt at discipline, Lee Hayul let out a whimper.

His once happy hands now felt empty and desolate.

A surge of sadness welled up. A spark ignited in his heart, stoking his desire to be coddled.

Some parts of his mind seemed frozen, memories blurring beyond recognition.

His reason, once sharp, now dulled.

Looking sulky, Lee Hayul burrowed his face back into her chest.

Soon, his breathing evened out.

“Ah, wait. You can’t fall asleep yet…”

Hearing his calm breathing, as if he were about to drift off, Liana panicked and gently shook him awake.

She had brought along an entire medical kit, assuming that Lee Hayul had suffered severe injuries, enough that he hadn’t even been able to send a distress signal.

So far, she had only given him a stamina recovery potion meant for patients.

More importantly, the monster Lee Hayul had fought was the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, known for its poisons and diseases.

Though the disease-bearing head hadn’t been confirmed, and he seemed fine for now, there was always the risk of latent symptoms emerging later, so she had brought all kinds of antidotes as well.

Those would need to be administered while he was fully conscious.

[I’m sleepy…]

[It’s warm…]

[I like it…]

[It’s cozy…]

“Cadet Lee Hayul? Little one? You can’t sleep yet. You need to take your medicine first…”

Liana, trying to prevent him from drifting off to sleep, gently shook him

while carefully lifting his head from her chest.

Even so, it seemed as though his consciousness was gradually sinking into sleep.

It wasn't surprising, given how utterly exhausted he seemed to be. He could lose consciousness at any moment.

"The medicine… I need to give it to him as soon as possible…"

As she wrestled with the idea of whether to feed him the medicine while he was half-asleep, Liana suddenly remembered that just moments ago, Lee Hayul had been quite focused.

Specifically… when he had been grabbing her chest with such concentration…

"……"

Liana's mind raced for a moment. On one hand, she couldn't help but wonder if this was too inappropriate a thought to entertain, but on the other hand, what did it really matter?

In truth, she hadn't felt much resistance to being touched by Lee Hayul. She had only been startled by the suddenness, not uncomfortable or displeased.

"Hmm… Well, here goes…"

Liana, with no other choice and needing to give him the medicine as soon as possible, placed her chest back into the grasp of the child who was on the verge of falling asleep.

Lee Hayul's body jerked slightly, and his hand instinctively resumed its previous kneading motions.

"Ugh…"

Shivering at the strange sensation, Liana quickly pulled out various medicines to administer, hoping to do so before he drifted off completely.

.

.

.

[Target (Lee Hayul) located and emergency treatment completed. En route to nearby city.]

[Would you like to transmit this message via the Special Communication Network (WE3-32)?]

[Yes/No]

Click-

The hologram flickered briefly before the message was sent.

"…At least some of them should receive it."

The surrounding gray zone had always had poor mana signals.

And with dungeons going berserk, along with the rampaging monsters, spirits, and superhumans, the mana disturbances must have gotten even worse.

That meant there was a chance the message might not be properly transmitted, but she had to send it regardless.

"I'm so tired…"

It was late into the night.

Though the sky was dark, Liana had set up a heating magic tool in the clearing she had created by chopping down a few trees, taking the place of a

campfire.

She had also set up some basic security measures, but even so, she felt like all the strength had drained from her body.

Leaning against a thick tree, Liana finally let out a deep sigh and allowed herself to relax.

Thanks to the heating magic tool, the area remained quite warm despite the chilly night air.

The warm, orange glow bathed the surroundings, creating a pleasant atmosphere.

After feeding Lee Hayul all the necessary medicine and beginning their journey to the nearest city, the sun had set.

Although Liana could certainly function at night, she too was feeling quite exhausted.

The news of Lee Hayul's disappearance had shocked Liana just as much as anyone else.

She had been the one to restrain a rampaging Atra, and it was Liana who had gone days without sleeping, tirelessly searching for him.

Her physical and mental stamina had been thoroughly drained.

Even so, Liana could continue. The real issue lay elsewhere.

-Snore…

[Happiness]

[Happiness]

[Warmth]

"……"

The steady, warm breaths that gently tickled her chest. The snug, satisfying weight of someone nestled perfectly in her arms…

Liana glanced down.

There, nestled in her embrace as though it belonged there, was the peacefully sleeping Lee Hayul.

He was undeniably a patient. A child whose body had mysteriously regressed, displaying symptoms they had yet to fully understand.

It would be too harsh to continue pushing such a child without allowing him proper rest.

And so, Liana too decided to rest and set up camp for the night.

She briefly examined him. From where she sat, she could see his face buried in her chest, sleeping soundly.

With a peculiar expression, Liana gently stroked Lee Hayul's hair.

'Oh… '

Unconsciously, a soft murmur escaped her lips. She had noticed it earlier, but his hair, already silky, now felt even softer.

It was addictively comforting. If she wasn't careful, she'd find herself hugging him and patting his head all day long.

[Patting feels good]

[Happy…]

[Cozy]

The necklace around her neck clicked, indicating his emotional state, which

was rather endearing.

She spread out a sleeping bag on the ground.

With the barrier she had set up, there was no need to worry about cold winds blowing in.

She had also deployed defensive magic, and numerous spirits were on guard, watching for any potential threats.

She lay down on the soft sleeping bag, naturally cradling Lee Hayul in her arms as they both settled in for the night.

Lee Hayul, using her arm as a pillow, instinctively burrowed back into her embrace.

[So soft…]

The sight of him acting so childishly brought a warm smile to her face.

She gently patted his back.

Even in his sleep, he reacted positively to the comforting gesture, letting out a soft, purring sound that made her chuckle.

"…What a strange feeling."

Liana muttered as she gently stroked Lee Hayul's cheek.

She was a former hero.

She had graduated as the top student of her local academy and had been ranked first in her class every year during her time at Shio-ram.

After graduation, she had ventured into the Demonic Realm, where she'd served as an important member of the frontline forces until her retirement due to injuries.

But her injuries hadn't been that severe. The Demonic Realm was a dangerous place, and even for Liana, there had been a risk of injury.

However, the injury hadn't been serious. It hadn't hindered her abilities, and with just a bit of healing, she could have recovered fully without any lasting effects.

She had been planning to return to the front lines.

-This is Venus Litera, Deputy Principal of Shio-ram. If you have the time, may I borrow a moment of yours?

Just as she was preparing to return, Venus Litera, the Deputy Principal of Shio-ram, had come to visit her.

While not as reclusive as the Principal, the Deputy Principal rarely made personal appearances, which piqued Liana's interest.

Intrigued, she had accepted the conversation, during which she received a proposal.

A proposal she chose to accept.

And so, she became a first-year professor at Shio-ram, specifically assigned as the supervising professor for Lee Hayul.

"Hmm…"

She absentmindedly stroked the child's cheek, finding the sensation strangely pleasant.

His soft, dough-like skin was irresistibly squishy, making it hard not to keep touching him.

Holding him in her arms felt nice too. Whether it was before or now, with his newly regressed body, cradling him filled her with a profound sense of satisfaction.

This wasn't a new feeling.

From the moment they first met, Liana had inexplicably felt a sense of familiarity and affection toward Lee Hayul.

Now, she thought she knew why.

'A fairy.'

Fairies are somewhat similar to spirits. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that fairies are a higher species than spirits.

Either way, they are related species.

Liana was a spirit user. She was born with a natural affinity for spirits, and spirits in turn found it easy to form contracts with her because of this bond.

Given that Lee Hayul resembled a fairy, it wasn't surprising that she felt a sense of affinity toward him.

Of course, even considering all that, she had felt an even stronger sense of affection and familiarity towards Lee Hayul than other fairies she had met, including the fairy baby Lee Seo-yul she had recently encountered…

-You will surely achieve what you desire, Hero Liana.

"…What I desire…"

Liana tilted her head in thought.

What she desired. A wish? A dream? Or perhaps a goal.

She didn't have any special ambitions or particularly challenging goals in mind.

She simply wanted to live safely and peacefully without any major threats.

One day, when the time came, she imagined buying a nice piece of land,

building a log cabin, brewing her own coffee, and sitting in a rocking chair in front of a rustic fireplace while leisurely reading.

It wasn't a grand dream, nor was it difficult to achieve.

For someone like Liana, who had more than enough wealth and fame, it was a simple matter.

Unless the world suddenly ended, that is.

The night grew deeper.

"…Should I remove the prosthetic arm?"

It would be better to restore his arm…

Liana spent the night, lost in thought, cradling Lee Hayul in her arms.

* * *

[Player Support System: Mental State]

…

▸ Current Mental Condition

[Fairy(?)] : ?

[Pretty?] : ?

…

[Player Support System: Affection Meter]

Lee Hayul → Liana Velus

[●●●●●●●○○○ (71▸74/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Kind Adult] [Softness] [Warmth]

CHAPTER 159
A TROUBLESOME CRYBABY (3)

Liana's main mode of travel was flight.

Using the spirits of the wind to soar through the air, ignoring the terrain below, was the fastest and most convenient method.

She could also use the spirits of the earth to move the ground itself, which was equally fast and comfortable. In fact, this method was superior in terms of security and stealth.

However, Liana preferred flying.

Even before she awakened her unique ability, Liana had always enjoyed the cool breeze.

Her hometown was filled with hills and mountains, and there was a particularly large hill right behind her house.

Whenever she climbed to the top and sat quietly near the peak, a refreshing wind would always greet her.

Lying down on the ground, closing her eyes, and listening to the sound of the wind often made time fly by.

That's why Liana preferred flying.

Perhaps because Lee Hayul had learned spirit arts from her, he also favored flying using the spirits of the wind.

Thanks to that, even as Liana flew through the sky, Lee Hayul remained calm in her arms without any complaints.

They would fly for a while, then, considering Lee Hayul's condition, Liana would periodically land to rest.

During those breaks, Liana would hastily eat her meals and also feed Lee Hayul his food and medicine.

Of course, Liana ate simple meals, while Lee Hayul was given porridge that wouldn't burden him during digestion.

And then, when it was time to give him his medicine…

-Squeeze…

[Soft]

"…He's developed a strange habit."

Every time, he would reach for her chest.

Normally, he stayed still, but whenever she administered the medicine, his hand would naturally reach out and grip her breasts.

'Is it because I let him hold onto my chest the first time I gave him medicine?'

It had become an odd habit. Now, if she didn't let him hold her chest while giving him medicine, he would start whining.

Liana looked down at Lee Hayul, who was squirming in her arms with a peculiar expression.

Lee Hayul, who had inexplicably turned into a child.

He had always been rather needy, even before, but now he was even more so.

A healthy mind resides in a healthy body.

No matter how strong a person's mind is, if their body is worn out, their spirit will also be negatively affected.

Considering that Lee Hayul, already prone to seeking comfort, had gone through such an ordeal… It was understandable that his now much smaller body was also showing signs of regression in his mental state.

'He's cute.'

More than just understanding, Liana was starting to feel a sense of maternal affection.

With a warm smile, she patted Lee Hayul's head, who was so focused on her chest.

The way he burrowed his face into her chest, seeking warmth, and how he whined while squeezing her breasts, reminded her of a baby seeking comfort from its mother.

Of course, Liana couldn't actually nurse him, as nothing would come out, but still.

After feeding him and giving him his medicine, she continued to take care of Lee Hayul while sending only her spirits to deal with any monsters or undead they encountered.

Low-ranking spirits were enough for most tasks, but when something was a bit more bothersome, she would send a mid-ranking spirit to handle it.

-Whoosh!

A cool breeze blew through.

Liana's hair fluttered gently in the wind.

As she turned her gaze slightly, she saw a bird flying toward her from the distance.

It wasn't just any bird.

It was a Wind Bird, a spirit made of wind, and it had just returned from finishing its assignment. It was a mid-ranking wind spirit.

From mid-ranking spirits onward, they begin to develop a sense of self.

Along with their self-awareness, they also develop distinct personalities and traits.

Liana extended her arm toward the spirit. Since it took the form of a bird, it had the habit of perching on her outstretched arm.

The wind spirit flew toward her.

"?"

And then, it flew straight past her arm.

In a casual glance, it barely acknowledged her and instead flew directly into her arms, where it began rubbing itself against Lee Hayul.

-Tweet!

[Wind Bird]

[Cute]

[Refreshing]

At the spirit's affectionate display, Lee Hayul broke into a beaming smile.

A smile so pure it seemed to light up the surroundings.

As if expressing his happiness, the wings attached to his back began to flutter.

Lee Hayul reached out and hugged the spirit tightly, as if it were a stuffed toy.

The scene was overflowing with warmth and affection.

It was a picturesque moment—a child who looked like a fairy and a wind spirit snuggling up to him with affection.

You could easily imagine this image being sold for a high price at an auction.

It was a sight Liana had grown quite accustomed to over the past few days.

As if showing off his fairy-like nature, every time Liana summoned a spirit, without fail, it would shower Lee Hayul with affection.

“Sigh…”

Liana let out a soft chuckle before snapping her fingers, giving the spirit enough time to express its affection.

-Snap!

Behind her, a crack appeared in the fabric of space. A suction force emerged from the tear.

-Tweet!

The wind spirit, satisfied after showing its affection, flapped its wings and was sucked into the crack.

[Regret]

[Bird]

The necklace clicked, expressing Lee Hayul’s lingering feelings of regret.

Liana chuckled softly and patted the pouting Lee Hayul, who had buried his face back into her chest.

“Little one.”

[…I’m not a little one.]

“Anyone can see that you are.”

Liana laughed again.

Just yesterday, he had been whining, asking to be coddled like a baby, but today, as his reason slowly returned, he blushed and shook his head shyly.

“We’ll be arriving soon. Our little one will go straight back to Shio-ram for a detailed examination and then be admitted to the hospital.”

[…Do I really have to be admitted?]

“Of course, you do.”

Liana spoke as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Did he really think he could just return to normal after causing such a major incident?

Lee Hayul flinched and avoided her gaze. It seemed he realized just how absurd his suggestion was.

“You should also be ready to get scolded when you return, don’t you think?”

At her words, Lee Hayul’s body stiffened. The wings on his back drooped.

Lee Hayul had sacrificed himself once again to save people, this time rescuing far more lives than in Shipnaha.

Had the extermination of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon been delayed, who knows how much more devastation would have occurred? Especially in a land already steeped in poison.

Furthermore, after the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was subjugated, the undead that had been rampaging across China had also significantly quieted down. The dragon had likely been the key to the necromantic spells.

The essence of a hero is to protect the innocent.

From a heroic standpoint, Lee Hayul's actions were worthy of high praise.

But…

From the perspective of Lee Hayul as a cadet, Lee Hayul as a child, or Lee Hayul as Liana's student, his actions were reckless enough to warrant a good scolding.

Liana hadn't scolded him yet.

It wasn't that she didn't intend to.

It was simply that she had decided to hold off because he was currently in a physically and mentally exhausted state.

-Squeeze…

[It hurts…]

Liana reached out and pinched Lee Hayul's nose. He pouted, his eyes watering as he gently grasped her fingers.

However, whether due to his weakened strength or a guilty conscience, he didn't push her hand away.

"Atra is especially furious… She's practically fuming."

-Hic…

Lee Hayul let out a soft hiccup.

"She was so angry that she was foaming at the mouth, trying to destroy every piece of furniture around her. It took everything I had to calm her down."

-Hic!

“And it’s not just Atra. Cadet Hong Yeon-hwa, who adores you… Cadet Elia, who’s been looking after Seo-yul… They’ve all been incredibly worried, angry, and heartbroken.”

Perhaps sensing the inevitable, Lee Hayul’s body began to tremble.

His frightened expression was both pitiful and endearing.

* * *

Atra’s assigned residence at Shio-ram.

On the far end of the second floor, there was a room loosely designated for work.

The room was equipped with a bookshelf stuffed with books, a table and sofa for receiving guests, and a desk for work, among other pieces of furniture.

-Rustle…

The bookshelf had been utterly shattered, its contents scattered across the floor. The books weren’t much better, and the other furniture had also been destroyed beyond recognition.

Even the protective magic on the ceiling had been breached, and dust fell from the damaged rafters.

A thin layer of dust settled on the desk, one of the few pieces of furniture still somewhat intact.

“……”

Atra’s gaze twitched momentarily. Her eyes swept over the dust on the bookshelf.

After glaring at the dust for a moment, her gaze returned to the door, where it remained fixed and unmoving.

Her eyes were bloodshot, devoid of life, and surrounded by dark circles that highlighted the tear stains on her cheeks.

-Yes.

-I'll be sure to remember your words, Master.

-There's nothing to worry about.

Suddenly, a memory of Lee Hayul's words surfaced in Atra's mind.

On the day of the term-ending ceremony… no, even before that.

When Lee Hayul had been preparing to leave Shio-ram, she had expressed her concerns, and these were the reassurances he had given in return.

There's nothing to worry about. I'll remember your words. I'll be careful. I won't get hurt. I'll return safely…

"Grit…"

Her teeth ground together.

Rumble… The desk, which had remained relatively intact, began to creak and crack under the pressure.

It looked as though it would split in half at any moment, but Atra didn't spare it a glance, her eyes still locked on the door.

'I need to give him a proper scolding.'

Lee Hayul. Her beloved student.

There wasn't even a single inch of him she could bring herself to strike… but this time, she had no choice but to discipline him.

He had promised to stay safe during the term break, yet he had secretly ventured into China, a gray zone.

If he had returned safely, without any injuries and with some accomplishments to show, she might have let it slide with just a pinch to his cheek.

But he had promised not to get hurt, only to end up fighting a monster of Fourth Rank or higher, disappearing, and shoving a dagger straight into her heart.

She couldn't let this slide.

She must not let this slide.

To prevent something like this from happening again, she had to give him a strict scolding.

Atra steeled herself.

-Step, step…

Footsteps.

Her sharp senses registered a familiar pattern in the approaching steps.

They were Liana's footsteps—the same Liana who had said she would find Lee Hayul, confirming that he wasn't gravely injured and would be bringing him back.

-Step, step…

The footsteps grew closer. The door opened, and the presence entered the building.

There were two presences. One was Liana's. The other… the other was…?

"…?"

Something felt off.

This second presence didn't feel like Lee Hayul.

And it was incredibly faint. Even with her sharp senses, she had almost missed it.

It was similar, yes. There were some commonalities… but some differences as well.

-Knock, knock.

"I'm coming in~"

As Atra pondered, Liana, now standing in front of the door, knocked and opened it.

The door swung open.

Atra's bloodshot eyes scanned the figure revealed behind it.

Liana. Green eyes and long black hair. Her complexion was slightly pale, likely from exhaustion due to the search.

Atra's gaze lowered.

And then…

'…?'

In her arms… she was holding… a child?

Atra's thoughts ground to a halt.

Even so, her bloodshot eyes scanned the child stiffly cradled in Liana's arms.

A head of pure white hair, rejecting any hint of external color.

Delicate, finely sculpted features, as if crafted by a master artist, and eyes that were gently closed in slumber.

A body small enough to be cradled comfortably, wrapped in three pairs of ethereal, blue wings.

Its tiny hands trembled slightly as they clutched Liana's arm, a sight that tugged at Atra's heart.

Lee Hayul.

His name immediately came to mind.

"…Uh…"

"Ahaha. Look at your reaction. I had a similar… Wait, why are you drooling…?"

A helpless sound escaped Atra's lips as her mouth hung open in a daze.

Creak… Atra quickly stood up, her body moving on autopilot.

"Huh?"

Liana blinked in surprise.

Her arms felt empty.

As she looked up from her now vacant arms, she saw Atra, already holding Lee Hayul tightly, embracing him as if lost in a spell.

"…Weren't you going to give him a stern scolding?"

Seemingly deaf to Liana's words, Atra continued to caress Lee Hayul, mesmerized.

* * *

[Player Support System: Affection Meter]

Lee Hayul → Liana Velus

[●●●●●●●○○○ (74▸75/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Kind Adult] [Soft] [Warmth]

CHAPTER 160
A TROUBLESOME CRYBABY (4)

Atra had so many things she wanted to say.

Didn't you promise you'd come back safely and quietly during the break?

You told me not to worry. You said you'd return without a scratch.

Then what were you doing in China? Why did another incident occur there, just like what happened in Shipnaha?

Are you deliberately putting yourself in harm's way, seeking out danger?

And what's the deal with the Gop-hwa Clan?

Why is that clan treating you, as a whole, like their significant other?

And what about that chunk of metal attached to your left arm?

Scolding, reprimanding, worrying, and nagging…

All sorts of thoughts swirled around in Atra's mind. She pondered deeply about where to even begin, finding it hard to decide on her first words.

"Ah…"

But nothing came out.

All she could manage was a breathless sigh, an exclamation of bewilderment slipping between her lips.

Atra barely kept her sanity intact. If she let her instincts take over, her rationality would be swallowed up, and she'd act on impulse.

Barely reigning in her urges, she clung tightly to Lee Hayul.

Just like before… but this time, his now smaller frame fit perfectly into her embrace.

An indescribable feeling of fulfillment swelled in her chest.

It was as if something that had been missing was finally perfectly aligned, and her body shuddered from the satisfaction.

In the midst of it all, the familiar scent teased her senses.

When she cracked open her tightly shut eyes, she saw pure white hair—whiter than anything she had ever seen in her life.

A color more pristine than the legendary Celestial Snow Flower, which was said to bloom once every several decades on the highest peaks of the Demonic Realm.

And from that hair came a sweet, almost intoxicating scent—something that no ordinary person could ever emit.

It was a mix of a rich, honey-like sweetness that filled her nose, combined with the comforting scent of freshly dried sheets under the morning sun.

It was Lee Hayul's unique scent.

Atra's eyes trembled.

Even before, it had been a scent that triggered an uncontrollable urge, difficult to resist. But now, it was even stronger.

It was nearly impossible to hold back.

She buried her nose into that white hair, which was sparking her intense urges.

“Sniff… Haaa…”

She inhaled deeply, letting the scent fill her lungs.

Atra’s body shuddered again as she greedily drank in the smell, burying her face deeper into his hair without any restraint.

“Uhm… Excuse me. This is, uh… kind of inappropriate, don’t you think?”

Liana, who had been standing awkwardly to the side, finally spoke up, her voice betraying her discomfort.

She glanced around, clearly feeling the tension in the air.

To her, the scene before her looked rather dangerous.

Atra’s appearance didn’t help. To be blunt, she didn’t look good at all.

Her once gleaming golden eyes had dulled and were trembling, as if lost. Bloodshot veins lined her eyes.

Her previously smooth and shiny hair had become frizzy and unkempt, with heavy bags under her eyes marking her exhaustion.

It wouldn’t be a stretch to think she resembled a complete wreck. Frankly, she looked like someone who wouldn’t seem out of place with a bottle of liquor or a cigarette in hand.

In fact, Atra had briefly considered reaching for both during her time of stress. In the past, she had always turned to smoking as a stress reliever.

But she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

That’s because of a traumatic memory involving Lee Hayul.

If she had indeed touched either, Lee Hayul would have likely been horrified and lashed out.

And if that had happened, Atra's already fragile state might have shattered entirely, leaving her a true wreck.

So, here was Atra now, a disheveled mess, hugging the tiny Lee Hayul snugly in her arms, her face buried in his hair, taking deep breaths.

It made her look like a person teetering on the edge of sanity.

Despite Liana's hesitant interjection, Atra didn't stop.

She didn't have the mental capacity to care about such trivial things at this moment.

She simply continued to hold Lee Hayul tightly and inhaled his scent relentlessly.

"Haaaa…"

How much time had passed?

Atra's urges had subsided somewhat, and a small thread of rationality had returned.

The overwhelming anxiety and pain that had haunted her for days seemed to dissolve, if only slightly.

A faint light returned to her dull eyes.

Atra let out a deep, shaky breath and slowly lifted her head.

The white hair she had been so close to slipped out of her view.

"…Huh?"

In its place was Lee Hayul's face, twisted in a sorrowful expression.

His usually gentle eyes were drooping, filled with a deep sadness.

Thump! Atra's heart sank. It felt like she had just stepped off a cliff, her stomach lurching from the drop.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry. Did I hug you too tightly? Did it hurt anywhere? Or… did it make you uncomfortable…?"

Had she let her urges control her too much?

Her faintly restored rationality screamed a warning.

In hindsight, her actions may have made Lee Hayul uncomfortable.

Previously, she had only indulged in his scent when his attention was elsewhere, or when he was asleep. But this time, she had acted far too openly.

Atra hurriedly adjusted her posture, cradling Lee Hayul more gently, all the while stammering out apologies.

Lee Hayul's eyes quivered.

Then, biting his lip as if holding back a flood of emotions, he buried his face into Atra's chest.

[I'm sorry…]

"Huh?"

His Necklace of Confession clicked softly as it shifted around his neck, now wrapped several times due to his smaller frame.

[Really, I'm sorry…]

The apologies continued to pour out.

Even the sound of sniffling echoed from deep within her chest.

Both Atra and Liana rushed over to comfort the sobbing Lee Hayul.

* * *

Before going to China, honestly, I didn't think it would be without danger.

China is a land abundant with dungeons and monsters.

Going there to deal with the Death Cult branch, and slaying monsters along the way, expecting no risk would have been overly optimistic.

So I had prepared an emergency escape plan.

A long-range spatial leap using the authority of space.

I had memorized the coordinates in advance, so if things got too dangerous, I could flee immediately.

That's why I had been able to face the death threats from the Death Cult leader with a certain level of confidence.

In terms of strength, I had grown significantly, and I could coordinate well enough with my master. I felt confident in my ability to handle things.

But instead of the Death Cult leader, a Twin-headed Venom Dragon appeared.

After contributing to the chaos, there was no way I could simply flee like a coward.

There were people within reach that I could save, and I wanted to minimize the damage as much as possible… So I threw myself into the fray.

And I teetered on the edge of death several times.

If it hadn't been for the unexplained regression of my body, I would have been poisoned and dissolved into nothing.

It was excruciating.

The sensation of my body disintegrating from the poison was terrifying.

The agony of my body burning, freezing, and turning to dust from the effects of the Tri-Sword was horrifying.

Dying alone, writhing like an insect in some unknown place, was terrifying.

[I'm sorry…]

But none of that compared to the pain I'm feeling right now.

Gathering what little strength I had recovered, I used the authority of observation.

Within the narrow scope of my power, I managed to catch a glimpse of my master's appearance.

She was a mess.

Her eyes, once sparkling like the morning sun, were now dull and lifeless. Her hair had become frizzy, the ends splitting.

According to Professor Liana, it had only been about a week since I was rescued and brought back here from the missing person case. And yet, Master had become so gaunt in that short time.

It was all because of me.

[Guilt]

[Shame]

[I'm truly sorry…]

My heart ached.

Because of her foolish disciple, Master had suffered.

And yet, here I was, feeling the sting of tears welling up in my eyes.

It was shameless of me, but both Master and Professor Liana were comforting me.

And that only made the tears continue to flow.

"…Hayul. Do you truly feel sorry?"

[Yes…]

[It's all my fault…]

After a while, Master, who seemed to be pondering something, finally asked.

Without hesitation, I nodded in her embrace.

"Really? If you're truly sorry, then you should accept the punishment, shouldn't you?"

[Yes…]

"Hmm…"

Again, I nodded without any hesitation.

I was fully aware of the magnitude of my mistakes.

Master gave me a complicated look.

Her gaze was difficult to interpret.

There was hesitation, as if she was unsure about something… A mix of emotions swirled in her eyes.

Master, still holding me, sat down heavily in the chair behind her desk.

Then, instead of patting my back, her hand drifted lower—to my rear.

-Gulp.

I swallowed hard, feeling the tension rise.

I still hadn't heard what kind of punishment was coming.

Fear washed over me, but I steeled myself to accept whatever was about to come. After all, it was my fault, and I deserved this.

Just as I braced myself, my body stiffened.

The hand that had been resting on my rear moved away… and then lightly swatted.

-Smack!

-Hic!?

Stars briefly flashed in my darkened vision.

.

.

.

A tingling sensation spread across my rear, followed by a strange warmth creeping up my spine. My back reflexively straightened.

It was a sensation I hadn't felt long ago. It wasn't as strong now, but I couldn't forget this bizarre feeling.

[Ma… Master…?]

Trembling, I asked, but Master didn't answer. She simply raised her hand again.

-Smack!

My body jolted.

It wasn't painful… but it felt oddly warm and tingly.

Only then did I realize what was happening.

This was punishment… a spanking. The kind of punishment you'd give to a misbehaving child.

My face burned with embarrassment.

I wasn't a child anymore, and yet here I was, receiving this humiliating punishment. I could feel my cheeks grow hot with shame and embarrassment.

My face flushed red automatically.

To hide it, I buried my face back into Master's chest, at which point the spanking stopped.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

Instead of spanking, she began to gently rub my back.

Master's voice was filled with concern, even though she had just raised her hand to punish me. It seemed like she was worried about whether it had hurt too much.

I glanced up at her and replied.

[…It's not that painful.]

My rear was warm and tingly… but it didn't actually hurt.

Even though my body had regressed in size and many aspects had changed, my skin and bones weren't as fragile as those of a typical child.

There was no way a simple spanking would cause any real harm.

Honestly, it wasn't even a proper punishment. A couple of light swats on the rear hardly counted as punishment at all.

"Then let's go a little more."

[Yes…]

Still, I felt ashamed.

I couldn't bring myself to lift my head as the spanking resumed.

-Smack! Smack! Smack!

'Ugh… '

It didn't hurt.

It just made me feel warm and tingly… and incredibly embarrassed.

In that sense, it had some merit as a punishment.

If I wanted to avoid this kind of humiliation again, I'd have to be more careful with my actions.

-Smack!

'…?'

That's when it happened.

I felt something strange.

-Smack!

The hand that landed on my rear lingered for a moment.

It gently cupped my bottom, patted it a few times… and then repeated the process.

From that touch, I could feel affection and concern.

It didn't feel like I was being spanked… more like I was being gently patted.

Suddenly, my brow furrowed.

The strange feeling became more apparent.

In a corner of my mind, an image came to me—of a parent tenderly patting their baby's rear.

And with that image, other people came to mind.

The Necklace of Confession clicked again.

[Comfort]

The dull voice echoed in the room.

"What… did you just say?"

Master's hand froze. Her expression turned blank with surprise.

'Ah.'

My mouth opened.

While I had been lost in thought, the necklace had spoken out loud of its own accord.

[Safety]

[Touch]

[Affection]

[Patting bottom feels nice.]

-Click-click…

The quiet voice echoed once more in the now silent room.

My already flushed face turned an even deeper shade of red, like the color of ripened fruit.

* * *

[Player Support System: Affection Meter]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

[●●●●●●●●○○ (84▸86/100)]

[Master] [Expectation] [Safety] [Desire for Affection]

CHAPTER 161
NOT A BABY

I received a medical examination.

The unexplained regression of my body.

Even if they couldn't identify the exact cause, if there was something wrong with my body, they should be able to find it.

"Hmm…"

"Mmm…"

There was a slight misunderstanding before the examination.

Master and Professor Liana sat me down on the sofa, both of them looking rather serious.

"A fairy, huh…"

Master looked at the wings fluttering behind me with an awkward expression.

Just a moment ago, things had been too chaotic for anyone to really notice, but now that things had calmed down, the way he was looking at me felt… peculiar.

"…You do look like a fairy."

Fortunately, he didn't seem to have any strong objections.

In fact, it looked like something clicked for him. His affectionate hand reached out and gently stroked my cheek, enough to wash away any

lingering anxiety.

I moved my cheek towards his hand, savoring the comfort.

[Happiness]

[Loves being petted]

"…Can we really just take him like this?"

Professor Liana, who had been watching my behavior with an exasperated look, pointed behind me… or more precisely, at the wings still attached to my back.

Three pairs of blue wings.

The Wings of the Sky.

The Wings of the Sky were the first artifact I acquired, chosen for its high compatibility with my pure mana.

I had continuously fed it mana to improve its performance, and after soaking it in the Lake of Mana, its abilities had been enhanced even further.

Then, I had used it as a medium for my spirit transformation, causing it to fuse tightly to my back. Even after the transformation ended, the wings remained attached.

Surprisingly, I could still feel them. The sensation of the wings moving at my command was… awkward, to say the least.

"…Shouldn't this be fine? Whether it's horns, wings, or even changes in skin color, there are rare cases where one's body alters due to the manifestation of a unique ability."

"But can we really count this as one of those cases? Lee Hayul's current state is… a bit too blatant, don't you think?"

Professor Liana's green eyes scanned me carefully.

"Snow-white hair, eyes as clear as ice, and translucent wings growing from his back."

I also observed my own appearance.

My originally black hair had turned completely white, and the Wings of the Sky were still firmly attached to my back.

"Spirit affinity so high that he can freely control spirits, pure mana, and… a rather beautiful appearance. Hmm…"

From the beginning, my affinity with spirits had been exceptional, and my mana had always been pure.

As for beauty… I didn't know about that, but most of the points seemed accurate.

Honestly, the word 'fairy' did come to mind immediately.

I wondered how I must look to others.

"I don't know much about fairies," Master said. "They're an extremely rare species. Even during my time in the Demonic Realm, I never encountered one. I've only read a bit about them in books."

Just as Master mentioned, fairies were indeed an extremely rare race.

There were very few of them, and their habitats were unknown, so there hadn't been much research on them.

The only fairy habitats I knew of were within the lands of the Taesan Clan and deep inside the African Demonic Realm.

Even then, access to those places wasn't easy.

The fairy habitats within the Taesan Clan's territory weren't accessible unless you had a certain level of personal connections.

During my third playthrough, I had only been able to enter the inner sanctuary of the fairy habitat after getting involved with Choi Jiyeon early on and building up a high level of affection.

And the Demonic Realm… fairies were hidden away quite deep. Not in the heart of the realm, but far enough in that reaching them was no simple task.

"But they're well known, aren't they? Was it the Robest Autobiography? That book sold so many copies…"

The Robest Autobiography.

It was an autobiography written by a hunter named Robest, who had been fairly famous in his field before his retirement. Because of his notoriety, the autobiography had gained a lot of attention.

That autobiography included a story about his encounter with a fairy.

I had read it when I was researching various materials after Lee Seo-yul was born.

My impression of it… was that it felt like a fairy tale.

It was the story of the protagonist, who was on the brink of death in the forest of the Gray Zone, and a small fairy who found and helped him.

Whether it was true or not, I didn't know. Even if he had met a fairy, whether he had really been helped by one was uncertain.

What mattered was that the autobiography had sold well, and as a result, the image of fairies had become well-known too.

Actually, the illustrations of fairies in the original game matched Seo-yul's appearance as well.

Perhaps that's why Professor Liana had concealed my appearance when we entered Shio-ram.

Even though Shio-ram had tight security, as soon as I showed the Proof of Special Admission, they let me through without much issue.

At that point, Master spoke up.

"Even considering all that, it doesn't seem like a problem… The Principal probably wouldn't have missed this."

"That's true. After all, they gave him a special admission slot. There's no way they'd bring him in without knowing. Maybe they even brought him here on purpose."

"Fairy or human, aside from the wings, there's not much difference."

"And if it becomes an issue… I'm sure the Vice Principal and Shio-ram will take care of it."

"How could you even prove he's a fairy in the first place? Just say the wings are an artifact and be done with it."

'Huh?'

The conversation between Professor Liana and Master revolved around how my race might become a point of controversy.

As I listened quietly to their discussion, Master's comment about just claiming the wings were an artifact made me tilt my head.

'…Aren't they actually an artifact?'

Regardless of why they were stuck to me, these wings were, in fact, the Wings of the Sky artifact.

The way they moved was identical to the Wings of the Sky.

The Wings of the Sky had a shape-shifting function, which allowed them to move as I commanded them with my thoughts.

I had made excellent use of that feature.

When left alone, the wings would revert to a cloak, but at my command, they could transform into weapons or armor as needed.

'Hmm… '

I focused and imagined the image in my mind.

-Thunk.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

The sensation disappeared.

Professor Liana and Master's eyes widened in surprise.

"…They fell off?"

The wings had detached from my back. They transformed into a cloak and wrapped around me.

'Oh, that worked.'

I blinked, somewhat dumbfounded. It had been easier than I expected. I should have just tried it from the start.

"…Well, that solves the issue, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it seems like it."

Master sighed deeply… or rather, he tried to, but ended up just pressing his hand against my cheek instead.

Amidst their bewilderment over my now younger appearance, the examination proceeded.

Admittedly, I had a small worry that I might be dissected based on my appearance and the ominous machinery surrounding me.

But with Master and Professor Liana standing firmly by my side, I was able to go through the examination feeling reassured.

The real problem came afterward.

"…Hayul?"

"Hiiing… Daddy…"

After the examination.

I met Elia, who looked almost as disheveled as Master, and Seo-yul, who was sniffling, her face still streaked with tears.

'Ah.'

Guilt gnawed relentlessly at my chest.

Self-hatred pounded against my skull.

My mind faded into darkness…

.

.

.

I had been through a lot, but the break wasn't over yet.

I had only stayed at the Gop-hwa Clan's residence for less than a week.

But I had been in China for quite a while.

I spent almost ten days running around, and after going missing, it took about a week for me to be rescued.

So, by the time I entered Shio-ram with Professor Liana, I had about a week left of the break.

[Contact: Hong Yeon-hwa]

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: You

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Stay put in the dorm until I return.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Don’t go anywhere.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Reply.

▸Me: Okay…

There were still many students who hadn’t returned to Shio-ram yet.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin were among them.

When I had gone missing, the Gop-hwa Clan had been thrown into a panic and immediately dispatched forces to search for me.

…I couldn’t bring myself to look them in the eye.

A member of their family—one who had even been added to their family registry—had gone missing after charging at a high-ranking monster less than ten days in. Naturally, the Gop-hwa Clan would be utterly terrified…

Even the Changhae Clan had dispatched forces.

That made sense too.

The Changhae Clan ruled over northern Korea and the Manchurian region.

Meaning, this entire Death Cult incident had happened right next door.

Plus, the monster that appeared turned out to be a Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

The Changhae Clan had suffered considerable losses to Twin-headed Venom Dragons in the past.

The poison and diseases spread by the dragons had affected the Changhae Clan's territory.

So when they heard another Twin-headed Venom Dragon had appeared… it must have triggered their trauma, causing them to mobilize their forces immediately.

On top of that, Choi Jiyeon, who had been involved in the incident with me, led the Taesan Clan to send troops as well…

And then I had gone on to slay the Twin-headed Venom Dragon and promptly disappeared.

I suppose they took the opportunity to conduct a search while they were at it.

Anyway, among those forces were Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin, who had both been at their respective homes for the break.

But I was rescued earlier than expected and was immediately whisked away to Shio-ram.

Hong Yeon-hwa had wanted to come right away, but as one of the key figures leading the dispatched forces, she had to stay behind to clean up the aftermath.

…

With that, I found myself with some free time.

I had planned to spend the entire break in China, but due to the incident, I ended up returning early.

I had no intention of wasting this time. Although my body was in this state, that didn't mean I couldn't train.

Even if I couldn't push my body, I could still train my mind.

In particular, I planned to focus on magic during the upcoming second semester.

Second semester of the first year.

If the academic schedule proceeded according to the original game, I should be able to enter the Floating Island.

In a world filled with all kinds of supernatural abilities, floating islands were by no means unheard of. But the one I had in mind was something else entirely.

'The Tower of Knowledge.'

The Floating Island I was thinking of housed the Tower of Knowledge.

The Tower of Knowledge wasn't particularly well-known to the general public.

Only those in the know, knew—yet even they didn't know much about it.

The Master of the Tower of Space had created the World Superhuman Association. The Master of the Tower of Harmony had created Shio-ram. The Master of the Tower of Observation had created the Observatory.

But the Master of the Tower of Knowledge had never created an organization.

They simply stayed hidden away on the Floating Island.

But in the original game, the protagonist, the special admission student, had been granted access.

'If things go according to the original… '

Of course, things might not proceed exactly as they had in the original story, and there was a chance I wouldn't be granted entry.

Even so, I planned to study magic.

Lately, I felt like I had been neglecting my magic studies.

So, I intended to spend the remainder of the break diving deep into magic.

And…

"Alright, my baby? Say 'Ahhh.'"

My thoughts were interrupted by the warmth on my lips. A spoon filled with warm vegetable porridge tapped gently against my mouth.

The one holding the spoon was Elia. She smiled brightly, urging me to open my mouth.

It was a bit embarrassing, but I couldn't really refuse her.

Especially not in my current situation.

'……'

I took a quick glance around.

There was no need to look far.

The chair I was sitting in—a baby's highchair.

Around my neck, alongside my Necklace of Confession, was a bib.

‘Oh my god… ’

Also… sitting next to me was Seo-yul.

She was in a similar state.

‘When did she get so big…?

Her body… it’s about the same size as mine now.

She was definitely smaller before the break…?

I felt utterly miserable.

There was also a swirling mix of emotions that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

It wasn’t so bad that I’d call it a negative feeling… but it was certainly something that kept me from lifting my head.

I shut my mouth tight and shook my head.

No matter how I thought about it, this wasn’t right.

No matter how childish or slow-witted I might seem, this kind of treatment wasn’t right.

[…I’m not a baby.]

[And I can feed myself—]

“Awww… my heart just aches seeing you so sick over the past few days. I feel like I’m going to cry…”

Elia suddenly wiped away a tear with her finger, speaking in an exaggeratedly mournful tone.

‘……’

It was obvious she was acting.

But still, I remembered the state Elia had been in just a few days ago.

Her hair, once bright yellow like a chick’s, had become dull and frizzy. Her face had looked haggard, as if all life had been drained from it, and her body and spirit had been utterly exhausted…

And Seo-yul, who had fallen asleep in her arms after crying herself out…

–… Ahh.

“There you go. Our baby eats so well. Such a good baby~”

I had no right to resist.

The warm porridge made its way into my open mouth.

* * *

[Player Support System: Measurement]

…

▸Mental State

[Fairy(?)]

[Regression]

[Growth]

[Complexity]

[Guilt]

[Embarrassment]

[Comfort]

…

[Player Support System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

[●●●●●●●○○○ (77▸78/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick] [Guilt] [Remorse]

CHAPTER 162
NOT A BABY…?

Seo-yul loved being held.

He would often stretch his arms towards me, his eyes shining with a silent plea to be picked up.

I could understand that.

I also felt good when I was in someone's arms.

If I had to compare it to something… it was like being snuggled up in a thick blanket, feeling cozy and warm.

Babies, in general, loved being held by their guardians.

By maintaining close contact with their parents, they feel psychological bonding and develop a sense of attachment.

They also feel secure knowing they are protected, and the sound of a heartbeat close by brings them comfort.

Seo-yul was likely no different.

Although I might not be the most reliable guardian, I still tried my best to hold him whenever he reached out.

"Daddy, I like it! Hold me!"

And today was no exception.

It was that time of the day when the warm sunlight poured in through the windows.

His belly was full, and drowsiness was surely about to set in.

Seo-yul beamed and stretched his arms towards me. His little wings stretched out as if they were yawning too.

For a moment, his pure smile seemed to brighten the room even more, as if even the sunlight was being pushed aside.

'How can he be this cute?'

The word 'fairy' suited him perfectly.

Sure, the fairies I'd seen in the original game's illustrations were beautiful in their own right, but Seo-yul was something else.

As I had done before, I put on my best smile and opened my arms to him.

I used to struggle with this because I only had one arm, but now, I had both arms again.

I could hold him properly without needing the help of Wings of the Sky.

"Daddy, you're the best!"

Seo-yul leaped into my arms.

I prepared myself, trying to recall my past experience of holding him gently—

– Oof…

But instead of comfortably cradling him, I felt the full weight of his body, which was getting closer to my size, crash into me.

The impact was much stronger than I expected.

Before I could fully adjust, the force caused me to fall backwards.

‘Gyaaaah…!’

Fearing Seo-yul might get hurt, I instinctively hugged him tight.

Together, our bodies tumbled backwards onto the floor.

However, there was no real impact. The living room floor was covered entirely with soft mats.

They were mats I had set up in my dormitory just in case Seo-yul fell and hurt himself.

Now, I was the one benefiting from them, which made me feel… a little strange.

“Hehehe!”

Seo-yul burst out laughing, clearly enjoying himself.

His laughter was as bright and melodic as a xylophone being played.

“Haha. Seo-yul is having so much fun, isn’t he?”

Elia, who had been in the kitchen, chuckled softly. She had an apron on, one that I had provided, and was busy tidying up the dishes.

It was a warm and peaceful scene.

Seo-yul, like a little animal, wriggled against me, rubbing his body into mine.

It was utterly adorable and endearing.

‘Ugh… ’

…The problem was, with him squirming on top of me while being almost my size, the pressure was becoming quite intense.

“Daddy, I like it!”

[I-I like Seo-yul too…]

“Hehehe… Daddy’s cheeks are so soft!”

[Ack…]

[Don’t bite…]

While we were playing, face to face, Seo-yul suddenly opened his mouth, lowered his head, and bit my cheek.

[Gyaaaaaah…]

Smooch, smooch… The weird sensation on my cheek made me squirm, but being pinned down beneath him, it was hard to escape.

– Sniff… Sniff… Daddy…

…More than that, the crushing guilt weighed heavily on me, making it impossible to resist.

I was too embarrassed to call myself a proper guardian, so rejecting even this kind of playful affection felt wrong.

In the end, I gave up resisting and went limp.

Seo-yul, as if enjoying the lifeless prey in his arms, continued wriggling all over me, crushing me further while his wings fluttered with joy.

– Click.

‘…?’

Suddenly, I froze at the sound of a conspicuous click in my ear.

What was that sound? I knew exactly what it was.

It was the sound of a camera shutter, like the one on a smartwatch.

I composed myself and asked, trembling.

[Elia?]

– Click, click.

“Yes, I’m listening… Oh, just move a little to the left! I can’t see Hayul’s face very well… Just like that, perfect!”

– Click, click.

Elia responded nonchalantly, as if nothing was wrong, and continued snapping pictures.

The kitchen, by the way, was sparkling clean, as if she had already finished tidying up.

Click… The shameless sound of the camera’s shutter rang in my ears, and along with it, a part of my dignity crumbled.

[Please stop taking pictures…]

[At least just take pictures of Seo-yul…]

“I can’t do that.”

Her voice might have been blunt, but she firmly cut off my pleading tone.

With a stern expression, Elia shook her head.

“It’s much cuter with both babies in the picture.”

[But I’m not a baby…]

“Hmm… Can you sense pictures using your detection ability too?”

[I can.]

“Every time I hear that, it amazes me. Most detection abilities can only pick up locations and outlines…”

Elia tilted her head and brought up a hologram of the picture she just took.

It was a freshly captured image.

In the picture, I was lying helplessly on the living room mat, with Seo-yul grinning on top of me.

“Anyone looking at this would think you’re just a pair of siblings playing together.”

[Just based on our size, maybe…]

[Wait a second.]

[Siblings?]

“Hm?”

Elia blinked.

Her attitude, as if she didn’t understand what I was asking, left me speechless.

[No matter what…]

[Why would you think I’m the younger one?]

“Seo-yul is bigger than you.”

[No, he isn’t.]

Clank! The Necklace of Confession clicked loudly.

Frustration surged up inside of me.

No matter how much smaller I had gotten, it wasn't to that extent.

Even the information from the Power of Observation…

The information…

Th-The…

…

[I'm bigger.]

"Sure, sure. Ah, now turn to the right."

[Don't ignore me…]

"Daddy, are you smaller than me?"

[Hrk…]

Suddenly, it felt like a knife stabbed straight into my chest. The words got stuck in my throat.

– Click.

The shutter sound went off once again.

Seo-yul, meanwhile, was smacking his lips.

"Nom, nom…"

[Gyaaaaah…]

Once again, something inside me crumbled…

.

.

.

“Haaaahmmm…”

Seo-yul let out an adorable yawn, his mouth opening wide.

His eyes were starting to droop, and his movements were slowly becoming sluggish, all signs of sleepiness overtaking him.

It was a natural reaction.

Babies sleep a lot, after all.

His belly was full, and he had played to his heart’s content, squealing in delight. Most babies would have fallen asleep long ago.

Seo-yul had held out for quite a while, but now, it seemed like his body was entering power-saving mode.

“Aww, is our little baby already sleepy?”

Elia, who had been watching from the side, gently took Seo-yul’s arm as he rubbed his sleepy eyes and lifted him into her embrace.

The weight that had been pressing down on me was lifted, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“I can still play…”

“Your eyes are closing, though. How about a nap now, and then you can play with Daddy when you wake up?”

“Mmm…”

Elia skillfully comforted the protesting Seo-yul, who was starting to nod off from drowsiness.

Seo-yul resisted for a moment, shaking his head slightly, but eventually, sleep

overtook him, and his eyes slowly closed.

Soon after, his soft, peaceful breathing could be heard.

“He falls asleep so easily, huh?”

[Yeah.]

[You’re amazing, really.]

“He wasn’t like this at first. When you weren’t around, he’d cry endlessly… Like a fussy little princess.”

Even though Elia spoke about how hard it had been, her touch was incredibly gentle as she stroked his hair and occasionally patted his back and bottom.

[It must’ve been difficult.]

[Thank you for taking care of Seo-yul.]

[I’ll make sure to properly repay you.]

I smiled awkwardly at Elia’s confession about how tough it had been.

Then, she suddenly let out a quiet chuckle as if she had remembered something.

“But you know, once I held him and started patting him, he started falling asleep so easily. At first, he was a bit difficult, but he warmed up quickly and became really affectionate…”

Who he took after.

At that moment, Elia’s gaze was directed at me rather pointedly.

That look was so unfair.

Considering we still didn't even know who his real parents were, to give me such a look? It felt like an unjust accusation.

…But since I had no real rebuttal, I chose to remain silent.

"Alright then…"

Elia, cradling the now-sleeping Seo-yul for a moment longer, headed towards the bedroom.

I forced my trembling legs to stand and followed after her.

Elia gently laid Seo-yul in a crib.

There was also a cradle nearby, but it seemed like they had stopped using it given that Seo-yul had grown much larger than expected in such a short time.

"We did use the cradle at first, but Seo-yul was so active that he kept trying to crawl out. It became quite the hassle, so I ended up holding him in my arms most of the time."

Before I could even ask, Elia casually answered the question I hadn't yet voiced, as if she knew what I was thinking.

I kept my mouth shut.

He kept trying to escape the cradle? Did he not like it?

There was no way I would've skimped on any of the items meant for Seo-yul.

Everything was made from the best materials, and I had personally added intricate magic engravings to them.

Because of that, my bank account, which had been stable for a while, had taken quite the hit…

‘Hmm…?’

As I was feeling sorry for myself, I suddenly sensed something poking the top of my head.

It felt like something was looking down on me with a sigh.

That strange sensation made me activate my Power of Observation, but I couldn’t detect anything.

It was an odd feeling.

“Alright, one baby is down. Now for the next one…”

After tucking Seo-yul in, Elia clapped her hands together, stretched out her words, and turned her gaze towards me.

Her eyes locked onto mine, and I felt a shiver run down my spine as I realized her intentions.

[?]

That unsettling look, the way her words trailed off, and the reference to “one baby.”

From the clues, I could only come to one terrifying conclusion. Instinctively, I took a step back, but her swift hands slipped under my arms.

– Hik?

Before I could resist, my feet left the ground, and a floating sensation took over my body.

“Alright… time for Hayul to take a nap too.”

Elia’s movements were exactly the same as when she had picked up Seo-yul earlier.

One hand supported my bottom, while the other cradled my neck and upper back as she effortlessly lifted me.

Suddenly, my face was pressed into something soft.

[Wait a second.]

[Hold on…]

– Thump… Thump…

Just as I was about to flail in desperation, the sound of someone else's heartbeat echoed in my ears.

Even through the layers of flesh, I could feel the pulse, and my own heart, which had been pounding rapidly moments earlier, slowly began to calm down.

A drowsy feeling of comfort began to push away the last remnants of my resistance.

The strength left my arms and legs, and they fell limply by my sides.

A soft chuckle echoed above me as Elia, amused by my sudden surrender, lightly patted my back and bottom.

It embarrassed me, but the gentle motions were soothing, and my mind grew foggy with relaxation.

It felt like my thoughts were dissolving into something warm and sweet, like honey.

It was a happy, almost intoxicating feeling.

But that only made it all the more ridiculous. This wasn't a normal reaction, by any means.

I pouted my lips in defiance.

[…This feels wrong.]

“What feels wrong?”

Elia responded. Her voice was gentle, like she was comforting a fussy child, which only made me feel more conflicted, but I continued anyway.

[I’m acting too…]

[Like a child in my mind.]

The realization hit me.

I wasn’t an adult.

Even though my body had grown to some degree, mentally, I was still stuck at the level of a child.

It felt like I was painfully aware of that once again.

Like just a few days ago.

My memory was hazy, like a clouded sky, but I think I had acted childishly towards Professor Liana, and I was doing the same thing now.

Most adults don’t dissolve into mush just because someone is holding and patting them.

“That’s just a matter of personal preference. Why should it matter?”

Elia, who was listening intently, replied.

She had a point.

I wasn’t hurting anyone, and it wasn’t something that would get me in trouble, so it really wasn’t a big deal…

'……'

Still, it was embarrassing to admit.

"And besides, right now, I don't think you have much choice in the matter."

[?]

Elia continued. Not having a choice? What did she mean by that?

"Body and mind are one. There are many ways to interpret that phrase, but one interpretation is that the mind and body are connected. It's a common concept when studying healing magic."

She smiled warmly at me as I tilted my head in confusion.

"Injuries affect both the body and the mind. If the body is hurt, the mind suffers. If the mind is hurt, the body weakens as well."

It was something I had heard before. I vaguely remembered a similar concept from the original story.

"In other words, it's possible that your mind is being influenced by your younger body."

Oh… is that so?

"So! The desire for comfort and affection that you feel when you're in my arms is a natural and unavoidable response, given your current condition."

Unavoidable… A natural response…

"And it's not healthy to suppress those feelings too much. Didn't you mention that you'd return to normal soon?"

Unhealthy behavior…?

Returning to normal? Well, that's what I had felt, intuitively, at least, but…

As I pondered, Elia continued to pat my head gently, as if confirming her own words with her actions.

“So, if you feel like you can’t hold it in anymore, don’t. You don’t need to worry about being a bother. I can handle whatever you need.”

Her hands and voice were kind, and the way she spoke made it seem like she would genuinely accept anything.

Even with my foggy thoughts, her earlier explanation made a lot of sense.

I had often heard of people bottling up their emotions only to explode later in unexpected ways.

With my softened mind, I could accept that reasoning.

It felt like a part of the wall inside me had crumbled.

‘……’

After a brief moment of thought, I buried my face into her chest.

“That’s a good boy~”

Elia smiled warmly.

* * *

[Player Support System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

[●●●●●●●●○○ (78▸80/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick] [Guilt] [Remorse]

…

[The Master of The Tower of Growth lets out a deep sigh.]

CHAPTER 163
SIGNS OF CHAOS

The place where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had been defeated was an ordinary forest.

Though it had been poisoned and the aftermath left it a dead, barren forest, there were still trees rooted in the ground, standing in what remained of the forest.

In the middle of the forest, there was a massive crater.

It was a result of the attack that presumably defeated the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, changing the landscape dramatically.

Around the crater, rows of barracks were set up in a circle.

These were the temporary bases for the investigation team dispatched by the World Superhuman Association, the search team, and the forces from Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan.

Even while the nearby area was busy with purification efforts due to the remnants of the venomous aura left by the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, the ground near the crater had been conveniently cleared of obstacles, and as the venom had all but disappeared, temporary bases were quickly constructed.

Among those gathered there was Hong Yeon-hwa.

'…What the hell happened here?'

Hong Yeon-hwa cautiously peered down into the crater.

It was so deep and wide that one might think a meteor had struck.

A change in the landscape.

If she wanted, Hong Yeon-hwa could also create such a thing.

If she unleashed Gop-hwa's flames onto the forest, everything would burn and disappear, and if she used Blaze Bloom on top of that, she could definitely create a large crater.

'But this… This size… would be difficult to achieve in one attempt.'

Hong Yeon-hwa narrowed her eyes as she carefully surveyed the crater. Even after doing the calculations, it was impossible for her to create a terrain change of this scale.

Even if she used her Expansion Ability, it would be a stretch.

Even her Blaze Bloom wouldn't be enough. Her evolution ability, which enhanced her physical capabilities, wouldn't help, and Sacred Flame, which she had yet to master, was focused on self-healing, so it wouldn't work either.

'…Did Hayul do this?'

The enormous crater, large enough that even higher-level attack magic would struggle to create it, was created by Lee Hayul.

Not only did he create the crater, but he also obliterated the Twin-headed Venom Dragon without leaving a single remnant behind.

Additionally, the land surrounding the crater, stretching far beyond its boundaries, had been overturned as if affected by the same strike.

Most likely, it was all done in one blow.

Considering the fact that the dragon had been weakened and affected by multiple adverse conditions as a necromancer, it was still hard to believe.

It wasn't that Hong Yeon-hwa underestimated Lee Hayul, but from what she

understood, this shouldn't have been possible.

Even though Lee Hayul had exhibited Gop-hwa's flames on par with her own, even considering that, this was beyond anything he should be capable of.

Ordinary Gop-hwa flames couldn't create such a crater. Even using Blaze Bloom wouldn't result in anything like this. And Lee Hayul hadn't yet achieved the Expansion Ability.

Even if he had achieved Blaze Bloom in a moment of crisis, leaving behind such a drastic mark was simply impossible.

Hong Yeon-hwa crouched down and stretched out her hand. Her gloved fingers traced the surface of the crater.

It was smooth.

Although not polished to a shine, considering the time that had passed since the creation of the crater, it must have been even smoother at first.

This wasn't the work of Gop-hwa's flames.

And yet, she could sense traces of Gop-hwa's energy.

The energy of Gop-hwa lingered in various places throughout the crater.

It was faint and difficult to detect due to the passage of time, but without a doubt, it was Gop-hwa's energy.

'…What is this?'

Hong Yeon-hwa fell deep into thought.

Once again, she realized how many secrets Lee Hayul had.

The most recent mysteries were his eyes and voice.

Just one kiss, and his blinded eyes were suddenly opened, and his silenced

voice returned.

At the time, she had been so shocked that she hadn't even been able to react properly.

It was so absurd that it warranted a hollow laugh.

Was he some sort of cursed princess from a fairy tale?

…Of course, his appearance certainly lent itself to such a theory, but in many ways, it was still hard to comprehend.

She hadn't asked him directly.

The first time she asked, Lee Hayul had looked troubled, as if unsure how to answer.

She could have pressed further. Hong Yeon-hwa already knew how to get him to talk.

If she held him close in her arms all day long, comforting him, his tightly sealed lips would eventually open. In fact, it had nearly happened on several occasions.

But Hong Yeon-hwa wasn't someone who ignored ethical boundaries.

She wasn't the type of person to forcefully pry out something that the person she loved seemed hesitant or uncomfortable revealing.

-Miss Yeon-hwa! Young Master Hayul has gone missing after the battle with the Twin-headed Venom Dragon!

-Krrrk…

-M-Miss Yeon-hwa?!

…It wasn't that she was never tempted to become such an unethical person.

She was tested by temptation and impulse at every moment.

In the past, Hong Yeon-hwa would have found such sweet and intense temptations and impulses unbearable.

Now, she felt proud of herself for enduring them in real-time.

But if she hadn't been able to resist?

By now, Lee Hayul would be confined to her bedroom, clinging to her, drinking milk from her chest at every moment…

Suddenly, a sweet vision of the future came to mind.

Temptation and impulse flared up within her.

'…Endure… Endure… '

Hong Yeon-hwa's body trembled as she chanted the word 'endurance' over and over again, biting down on her lips.

The taste of blood faintly spread in her mouth, and the sticky mental fog that had been clouding her thoughts slowly began to clear—

"Yeon-hwa, what are you doing?"

"Ah…!"

"Huh?"

Just then, a familiar voice rang out from behind her. Startled, Hong Yeon-hwa let out a strange sound and jumped up.

Baek Ahrin, who had been approaching her, blinked at the exaggerated reaction.

"Wh-What the heck? Why did you call me?"

“What were you doing that scared you so much? Were you doing something weird?”

“I was just lost in thought, and you startled me, okay?! Don’t pick a fight with me.”

“You’re being mean… Can’t you speak to me as kindly as you do to Hayul?”

“Crazy woman…”

Hong Yeon-hwa scrunched her face in disgust at Baek Ahrin’s teasing words. Seeing her reaction, Baek Ahrin let out a soft chuckle.

“So? What were you really doing?”

“Not much. Just observing.”

Hong Yeon-hwa replied curtly.

Baek Ahrin seemed to think for a moment before stepping closer and crouching down beside her to look into the crater.

She, too, had seen this crater plenty of times over the past few days.

It was located right in front of their temporary base, and it was so massive that it was impossible to miss.

“Hmm…”

Baek Ahrin reached out her hand. Like Hong Yeon-hwa, she traced her fingers over the surface of the crater as she spoke.

“Did you hear about Jiyeon? She was discharged from the hospital yesterday.”

“Already? Oh right, Taesan.”

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked, as if she had just remembered.

The manifested powers of Taesan came with superior physical abilities.

Their overall physical prowess grew, and their defense and durability became outrageously strong.

At the level of controlling life force, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call them near-immortal zombies.

"By the way, why is it so noisy over there?"

Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly pointed to the other side.

That's where Taesan's temporary base was set up, and it had been noisy over there for the past few days.

Taesan had been the first to set up their temporary base here, and even when Hong Yeon-hwa and the rest arrived shortly after, the commotion hadn't stopped.

Although they had used soundproofing magic, making it hard to hear exactly what was happening, the chaotic and restless energy was obvious.

"Well, the heir got caught up in the battle. It's only natural they're in a frenzy. The next head of the clan almost died out in the field, after all."

"Is that so? But Jiyeon was discharged just fine, wasn't she? Ah… and she was discharged before I could even visit her in the hospital again…"

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered with a conflicted look on her face.

There had been other times when she heard that Choi Jiyeon had been hospitalized.

Each time, Hong Yeon-hwa had made plans to visit, only to find that Choi Jiyeon had already been discharged by the time she arrived, waving awkwardly as if nothing had happened.

That was in the past, though. They hadn't seen each other much recently.

The last time they had met… in the lounge…

'Ah, damn.'

The memory was so embarrassing.

Hong Yeon-hwa bit her lip again, trying to suppress the rising shame.

"Well, since the investigation is over, I'll just have to stop by Shio-ram and greet her once the break ends."

The investigation was over. In truth, there hadn't been much to investigate in the area.

The corpse of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had completely disappeared, and all that was left were the remnants of the battle in the surrounding area.

There wasn't much Hong Yeon-hwa could contribute at this point.

Baek Ahrin, who had a wider range of skills, might have been able to help, but with the end of the break approaching, she would be heading back to Shio-ram soon.

"…Yes, Shio-ram. It's time to go back."

Hong Yeon-hwa would also be returning to Shio-ram.

And… she would have to meet with the boy who had almost died out in the field, nearly making her a widow for no reason.

-Crunch.

The dirt in Hong Yeon-hwa's clenched fist crumbled into dust.

With a sharp motion, Hong Yeon-hwa stood up.

* * *

"…Hmm…"

As Hong Yeon-hwa's figure disappeared into the distance, entering her part of the temporary base, Baek Ahrin turned her gaze back to the crater.

It was enormous. You'd likely have to launch several advanced spells after careful preparation just to create something of a similar size.

As Baek Ahrin blinked, she glanced down at her hand.

'…Is he not even trying to hide it anymore?'

A handful of dirt was crumbled in her palm. It had been scraped from the surface of the crater.

Her white gloves were dirtied, but Baek Ahrin didn't seem to care as she rubbed the dirt between her fingers.

'Or perhaps he didn't have the luxury of worrying about the aftermath since his life was at stake.'

After all, with the Twin-headed Venom Dragon chasing right behind him, survival would have been the priority.

'But when you look at the traces, it seems like he had some room to spare… '

With a strange glint in her eyes, Baek Ahrin kneaded the dirt, which carried faint traces of Changhae's energy.

Even among those who could manifest Changhae, Baek Ahrin, with her exceptional mana-detection abilities, could barely sense the faint energy of Changhae here.

Focusing her mind, she carefully analyzed the energy of Changhae.

There wasn't much information due to the uniformity of the sample, but…

"…Hehe."

She did discover something.

'It was worth showing off.'

Not just the power output, but the precision with which Changhae had been used was remarkable.

It was a very pleasing discovery.

Baek Ahrin smiled brightly.

* * *

Border of Ao Han and Naïman.

The forces from the Taesan clan dispatched to the site where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was defeated.

Their commander, Lee Sun, was not a manifestation of Taesan.

He was a branch member who inherited the blood of the ancestors, but instead of Taesan, he manifested an earth-based attribute.

Compared to Taesan, one could say he was of a lower rank.

However, he had enough talent to become a high-level hero.

Furthermore, his loyalty to the clan, proven over many years, and the experience he had accumulated earned him his position as commander of the forces under the Taesan clan's command.

In other words, Lee Sun was someone with a lot of experience.

He had been stationed on the frontlines of the Demonic Realm for a long

time, gaining plenty of combat experience. He could handle most unexpected situations with ease.

"…I'm sorry. My head is pounding a bit."

But right now, dealing with this situation was proving difficult.

In the command center of the temporary base, Lee Sun sat behind a desk, holding his head in his hands and groaning.

"I understand."

Across from him, delivering his report, was Lee Eun-hyuk. He nodded stiffly.

Like Lee Sun, Eun-hyuk was from the branch family, but he had manifested Taesan.

Though his Taesan manifestation wasn't particularly powerful, his acquired detection skills made him a valuable asset for this kind of search operation.

"Shall I continue with the report?"

"Please do."

Although Lee Eun-hyuk's unique power placed him above Lee Sun, the position he was given by the main family made Lee Sun his superior for now.

Lee Sun barely managed to nod.

Seeing how confused he looked, Lee Eun-hyuk couldn't help but nod inwardly as well.

He was as confused as his superior.

Lee Eun-hyuk began to speak.

"At the site where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was defeated, we detected traces of Taesan's energy—though different, it was distinctly

Taesan."

"…Is there a chance it's a mistake? Could it have been confused with Lady Jiyeon's Taesan?"

"We conducted detailed scans over the past few days. While there are some similarities, we've determined it to be a separate energy."

Hearing the firm confirmation, Lee Sun closed his eyes tightly.

"Sigh…"

His head had already been in poor condition lately, and now he was worried it might get even worse.

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CHAPTER 164
DON'T BULLY DAD!

After finishing her tasks, Hong Yeon-hwa returned to Shio-ram.

The gate terminal at Shio-ram was bustling with people.

"Look at the crowd. If the building were smaller, we wouldn't even have made it inside."

On their way out, Hong Yeon-hwa glanced back at the still-crowded interior, her face showing clear distaste.

"It's not just us. Everyone's probably coming back today or tomorrow."

Next to her, Baek Ahrin shrugged nonchalantly.

"Once the semester starts, it's hard to spend extended time outside. So there are probably many who stayed out as long as possible during the break."

There were a few cadets who remained at Shio-ram during the break, but since it's difficult to spend much time outside during the semester, most of them left the institution.

Hong Yeon-hwa, after completing her tasks, stepped out of the crowded building.

Finally, the blue sky and fluffy, white clouds came into view.

"Phew…"

She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the refreshing air.

Although they weren't on the outskirts of the island, there was still a faint,

salty sea breeze that occasionally tickled her nose.

It wasn't a particularly pleasant scent, but right now, it felt oddly comforting.

China.

Though it wasn't the Demonic Realm, it wasn't normal either.

There were regions where dungeons had run rampant, breaking through barriers and merging with this world.

Many areas were still deeply steeped in the venom of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, giving off a foul stench.

It wasn't unbearable, but it was enough to sour one's mood.

Now, standing amidst such a peaceful scene, Hong Yeon-hwa felt a wave of relief wash over her.

Just for a moment, she allowed herself to enjoy the change in atmosphere.

Then, she resumed her steps.

"Ariel, go and take my luggage to the dormitory."

"Yes, understood."

Behind her, Ariel, who had been following like a shadow, bowed her head.

Ariel had accompanied her on the trip to China.

It was only natural.

Ariel was once a top-tier hunter.

She had a knack for tracking, so she had come along to help locate the missing Lee Hayul.

Fortunately, Lee Hayul had been found relatively quickly and was now staying at Shio-ram.

It was still a hot topic.

Lee Hayul, who had slain the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, which had nearly repeated a past nightmare, before the damage could spread.

His fame and attention skyrocketed. Though some at the World Superhuman Association had doubts about the situation, thinking he had gotten involved in yet another incident… all those voices soon quieted down under the association's authority.

"It's a pity, though."

"What is?"

"I've heard that the young master has… become younger. I would have liked to see it for myself."

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes twitched.

"It's an astonishing story. Physical regression, they say. I've never heard of such a case before… could it be a variation of a complete metamorphosis?"

"…You'll have plenty of chances to see him later."

"True. Indeed, that's a wise answer."

Ariel clapped her hands together in a mock applause, her face expressionless.

"My desire is still within tolerable limits. I shall suppress it for now in anticipation of the future, so Miss, please go ahead and satisfy your own desires quickly."

"Hey, that sounds a bit weird, doesn't it?"

“Oh, I apologize.”

With a peculiar tone, Ariel responded and quickly gathered the luggage before departing.

Her attitude was as brazen as ever.

Hong Yeon-hwa shook her head in mild disbelief but didn’t say more.

During the time when Lee Hayul was missing, Hong Yeon-hwa had been so frantic that she didn’t notice anything around her.

In her distress, she had snapped at those around her, and Ariel had borne the brunt of it.

In hindsight, Hong Yeon-hwa realized it was her own fault.

* * *

After hastening her pace, Hong Yeon-hwa arrived at her destination.

Her destination was Lee Hayul’s dormitory.

-Are the blessings applied outside too? The growth rate is unclear, and I’m confused.

-If the results are still ambiguous even with blessings, that in itself is surprising…

-Bastard.

Just like outside, the dormitory was packed with people… or more accurately, cadets who had returned to Shio-ram.

Though the lobby was crowded and navigating it was tricky, as soon as Hong Yeon-hwa entered, the crowd parted for her.

While the rumors surrounding Hong Yeon-hwa’s ferocity had died down a

little, thanks to her frequent appearances with Lee Hayul, they hadn't completely disappeared.

She pressed the elevator button and waited.

Soon, the doors closed, and she felt the familiar sensation of ascent.

Hong Yeon-hwa kept her eyes on the numbers displayed above the door.

2, 3, 4…

The elevator seemed to move rather slowly. Was there something wrong with it?

"Hmm, hmm…"

As she impatiently tapped her fingers while crossing her arms, a strange sound reached her ears.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes twitched.

That strange sound. It wasn't new. She had been hearing it for a while now.

"…What is that?"

"Hmm? What's what?"

Hong Yeon-hwa turned her head to look at Baek Ahrin.

With her hands clasped behind her back, Baek Ahrin hummed a little tune, tilting her head innocently.

Baek Ahrin had also been invited by Lee Hayul. It seemed he intended to share the secret about Lee Seo-yul's existence.

It made sense. It wasn't something he could keep hidden forever, so revealing it to those close to him was the logical step.

What bothered Hong Yeon-hwa, however, was that Baek Ahrin had learned the secret around the same time as she had.

“You seem to be in a good mood. Did something nice happen?”

“Not really… I’m just feeling particularly well today~”

‘Not really, my foot,’ Hong Yeon-hwa thought, narrowing her eyes.

Baek Ahrin always acted cheerful, but today, there was something different.

After spending considerable time together, Hong Yeon-hwa had developed a sense for these things. Baek Ahrin wasn’t just pretending to be in a good mood today—she genuinely was.

As Hong Yeon-hwa pondered over this oddity, the elevator doors opened.

She suppressed her swirling thoughts and hurried down the hallway.

Finally, she reached the door.

The nameplate read “Lee Hayul.”

‘Sigh… ’

Hong Yeon-hwa closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She had prepared herself mentally, but she still wasn’t entirely sure how she would react once she saw him.

Anger simmered within her. He had wandered off on his own and almost died. Her rage was burning hot. She might just grab him and scold him right on the spot.

Was she looking forward to it? The fact that he had become younger? She had heard the news but hadn’t seen it for herself. Elia had offered to send a photo, but Hong Yeon-hwa had refused, wanting to see it with her own eyes.

Behind this door was Lee Hayul.

-Gulp.

Hong Yeon-hwa swallowed hard and opened the door.

The entrance came into view.

Several pairs of shoes were neatly arranged on the shoe rack.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes narrowed.

Most of them weren't Lee Hayul's but women's shoes. She had been told about this in advance, but it still made her feel a bit uneasy.

That feeling soon faded, replaced by the sweet scent filling the air.

That familiar aroma… the honey-like, sweet fragrance that was uniquely Lee Hayul's.

Perhaps because it was where he resided, that scent was particularly strong here.

Hong Yeon-hwa's expression softened.

"What are you doing?"

Prompted by Baek Ahrin's poke from behind, she removed her shoes and stepped into the living room.

There were quite a few people in the living room.

Elia Slade, Liana Velus, Atra Clyde…

And…

Lee Hayul, sitting on the floor? Hong Yeon-hwa froze, her breath catching in her throat.

Her eyes trembled as they scanned Lee Hayul.

His snow-white hair was so clean and pristine that she felt an almost overwhelming urge to dye it with her own colors.

An aura that exuded mystery and dreamlike quality surrounded him.

And his skin, now even fairer and softer than before…

'Wait.'

For a moment, Hong Yeon-hwa's thoughts came to a standstill.

His skin, fair and soft… and the scars on his right arm were gone.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes widened.

"Yeon-hwa?"

A voice called from behind her, but she didn't hear it. All her focus was on Lee Hayul, specifically on his right arm.

The scars left by Gop-hwa were notoriously difficult to erase, often considered permanent marks or brands.

Yet now, the once-scarred arm of Lee Hayul was smooth and flawless, covered in soft, pale skin.

A ripple of emotions surged through Hong Yeon-hwa.

As she approached, she couldn't help but notice just how much smaller and more delicate Lee Hayul had become.

He was incredibly petite… easy to hold in her arms.

An impulse arose.

She still wanted to scold him, but that could wait.

Hong Yeon-hwa absentmindedly reached out her hand.

-Slap!

“Huh?”

Her hand was slapped away by a tiny hand from the side.

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked.

The fog clouding her mind cleared.

Her narrowed vision returned to its original state.

That’s when she saw the girl standing next to Lee Hayul, glaring at her with a fierce look.

The girl resembled Lee Hayul.

Her hair was similarly white, and she was just slightly larger than him.

The main difference was her hair had a subtle, iridescent glow, unlike Lee Hayul’s pure white.

Moreover, her sharp eyes gave her a much more intense and confident appearance, unlike Lee Hayul’s gentle demeanor.

And, of course, there were the beautiful, multi-colored wings on her back.

‘Ah.’

Lee Seo-yul.

The fairy child born from the egg retrieved from The Tower of Growth, who had come to see Lee Hayul as a parent.

The child Lee Hayul had nervously admitted to raising.

“Don’t bully Dad!”

-Clang, clang!

Her clear voice rang out like the striking of a musical instrument.

Lee Seo-yul, who had yelled, raised her eyes fiercely and wrapped her arms tightly around Lee Hayul.

She even spread her wings wide to completely shield Lee Hayul.

As if protecting him from some kind of danger.

The problem was, she seemed to regard Hong Yeon-hwa as the danger.

Hong Yeon-hwa was left speechless.

[Seo-yul, no…]

[You shouldn’t do that…]

[I’m sorry.]

[Seo-yul must have misunderstood.]

[I’m really sorry…]

Lee Hayul, who had been standing stiffly, suddenly snapped back to attention. He anxiously glanced at Hong Yeon-hwa while trying to calm down Lee Seo-yul.

Even in his tense and weakened state, his actions to protect his daughter were quite heartwarming.

“No, um… I didn’t do anything, though…?”

But Hong Yeon-hwa was simply at a loss for words.

All she had done was reach out to hug him, but now she looked like some villain threatening the family.

“Trash.”

“…”

Baek Ahrin, standing behind her, whispered teasingly, and for some reason, it hit Hong Yeon-hwa right in the chest.

Her eyes twitched in frustration.

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CHAPTER 165
CURSE

It took some time to calm Seo-yul down.

“Now, Seo-yul? You shouldn’t act like that towards others, okay?”

-Grrr…

Seo-yul, held in Elia’s arms, bared its teeth. It even started growling deep in its throat.

The behavior was reminiscent of an animal threatening an enemy, and it left quite the impact on me.

‘Why is it acting like this?’

Seo-yul was showing an unusual amount of wariness toward Hong Yeon-hwa.

This was the first time Seo-yul had shown such strong caution.

Of course, Seo-yul wasn’t exactly friendly when it first met Elia either.

It had acted sulky and displeased, but it wasn’t to this extent.

When Seo-yul met Master for the first time a few days ago, there didn’t seem to be any strong rejection.

There was a small degree of discomfort, but it could easily be understood as a child’s natural wariness toward a stranger.

In contrast, Seo-yul had been surprisingly friendly to Professor Liana.

Instead of keeping its distance and staring, Seo-yul had approached Liana first, curiously circling around her.

Liana was the first person Seo-yul had quickly allowed to pet it, hold it, and even engage in physical contact.

'Is it because she's a Spirit Summoner?'

A fairy and a spirit… While it's hard to pin down, they're likely somewhat related.

Seo-yul is a fairy, and Professor Liana is a powerful Spirit Summoner with immense spirit affinity. It wouldn't be strange for them to feel some sort of kinship.

The same could be said for Elia. She also has innate spirit affinity, which could explain why they became close so quickly.

'…Kinship?'

Suddenly, I was struck by a strange feeling.

Kinship… a sense of familiarity and comfort…

'Didn't I feel something like that too?'

When I first met Elia… let's just say my mental state wasn't great.

I had been dragged from my comfortable life as a shut-in into a strange, game-like world.

Without my glasses, my blurry vision had turned nearly pitch-black, while spatial information had been forcibly crammed into my mind.

My sharpened senses picked up the murmurs around me with painful clarity, and I could feel every gaze piercing into me.

With a mind already weakened from years of isolation, it was impossible to handle all that attention.

There were people who tried to help me, but there were also times when I was so startled that I ran away.

But I didn't react that way to Elia.

From the first moment I swept the area with my spatial perception, I hadn't felt any resistance toward her.

Neither the sounds nor the gazes caused any discomfort.

Something about her presence felt calming… I had been tense, but I was able to receive her help without running away.

'And Professor Liana… '

It had been similar with her as well.

From the start, I didn't feel any discomfort; instead, there was a sense of ease and warmth.

Though she was the one who first apologized and offered her assistance, I had been the one to proactively ask for help with my mana training.

Looking back, it was rare for me to ask others for help first.

'…'

It was hard to put into words.

"Are you okay? Are you feeling sick?"

Lost in thought, I must have made a sour face without realizing it because I felt a hand touch my cheek.

It was Hong Yeon-hwa's hand, placed gently against my cheek as she leaned

in close.

Startled by the warmth and concern in her touch, my body flinched involuntarily.

“Hmm?”

I observed her quietly.

The shadows under her eyes, the slight fatigue in her expression… I could see the traces of emotional stress.

Who had caused her that stress? Who had made her go all the way to China to suffer?

It must have been because of me…

Despite all that, she didn’t express any anger; instead, she showed concern first. The guilt washed over me.

Hong Yeon-hwa didn’t say anything further, she just quietly stroked my cheek.

After a brief pause, I carefully opened my eyes.

My heavy eyelids lifted slowly, revealing my dull, grey eyes.

My vision overlapped with the information from my Power of Observation.

The world appeared foggy, shrouded in mist.

And amidst the dreary fog, I could see the bright red figure of Hong Yeon-hwa.

“Hmm?”

“Huh?”

"…What?"

Various exclamations of confusion, surprise, and shock erupted from those around me.

Unfazed by the reactions, Hong Yeon-hwa stretched out her arms and lifted me into her embrace.

A soft, warm sensation enveloped me.

The scent of milk, which had been tickling my nose earlier, now filled my senses completely.

The warmth of her body was comforting, and I felt like I might melt away.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

As she lightly tapped my bottom, Hong Yeon-hwa asked, her striking red eyes fixed on me with a look that seemed to be asking for something.

I knew what she wanted. Nervously, I swallowed and spoke.

"I'm… sorry…"

My voice, awkward and stilted, stumbled out.

It had been so long since I had spoken that the words didn't come out smoothly, stuttering as they left my mouth.

My eyes were the same. Keeping them open for too long made them sting, causing them to quiver slightly.

"Hmm. Does it hurt to keep your eyes open or speak? You're not overexerting yourself, are you?"

"I'm… fine."

It was slightly embarrassing, but seeing Hong Yeon-hwa's bright, delighted

smile made me feel better too.

I had been terrified that she might scold me severely or be upset, but thankfully, that didn't seem to be the case.

Relieved, a small smile spread across my face.

At that moment, Hong Yeon-hwa slowly lowered her head.

Her breath brushed against my skin, and her scent grew stronger.

Her face filled my vision.

-Smooch.

A soft sensation pressed against my lips. It was moist and warm. There was no mistaking what this affectionate gesture was.

My body shivered.

"…Ugh."

The warmth soon withdrew.

For a brief moment, I felt a pang of disappointment.

"…What the…?"

Then it happened.

A dreary voice, so chilling it made me tremble, invaded my ears.

I turned my head toward the source of the sound, but all I saw was the dense fog.

However, my Power of Observation picked up on Master's expression, filled with a mixture of disbelief and devastation.

“Hmph.”

For some reason, Hong Yeon-hwa had a triumphant smile on her face.

-Crack!

A chilling sound escaped from Master’s clenched jaw.

* * *

“…So, after a kiss, your sight returned, and you were able to speak?”

A while later.

Having regained her composure, Master listened to my explanation with a baffled expression.

It was as if she couldn’t believe what she had just heard.

The reactions of those around her were similar.

Elia tilted her head, a giant question mark practically hovering above her, while Baek Ahrin seemed deep in thought, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“If it’s a psychological issue, I guess that could make some sense… maybe?”

Professor Liana offered her thoughts, though she didn’t seem fully confident in her own explanation.

‘Hmm… ’

I understood why they were reacting that way.

If I were in their shoes, I’d find it hard to believe too.

But even I couldn’t explain exactly what had happened.

I still didn’t know why the curse had loosened, even if only a little.

At the time, my emotions had been all over the place, and I had been too overwhelmed to think about it clearly. But even after reflecting on it, I couldn't come to a definitive conclusion.

The best guess I had… was that the kiss had somehow triggered my senses to return.

The room grew quiet.

Everyone seemed lost in their own thoughts.

I had plenty to think about, too. Or rather, to agonize over.

'…Should I reveal the curse?'

At the very least, I could pass it off as some kind of disability, and admit that my sense of taste and smell were sealed.

It was the same dilemma I had faced at the beginning of the semester, when I ultimately decided to keep it hidden.

The Curse of Shortened Lifespan.

Even if I told people about it, I had no way to prove it. Not even the association's thorough medical examinations had been able to detect the curse.

There was the Curse of Sensory Sealing and the Curse of Silence.

I could demonstrate these phenomena, but I had no way to explain them as curses rather than disabilities.

And how could I tell Hong Yeon-hwa, who had so eagerly offered me sweets and meals and asked if I had enjoyed them, that I couldn't taste anything?

So I hid it.

I decided there was no need to cause unnecessary confusion.

After all, I planned to lift the curse in the future. If I couldn't… well, I'd die quietly somewhere, and it would remain my secret.

But I was starting to regret that decision.

It had been a carefully considered lie, but in the end, it only led to regret.

And if I kept my mouth shut this time, the regret might be even worse in the future.

I steeled my resolve.

I couldn't keep living with this secret.

Even if I couldn't reveal everything, I had to be honest about the curse.

There were people who would believe me, even without proof.

[The truth is…]

-Bzzz!

I couldn't open my eyes because of the curse… That's what… happened…?

'What?'

My words came to an abrupt halt.

The Necklace of Confession froze.

No, had the world itself stopped?

'What just froze?'

My senses went haywire. I couldn't feel anything. The warmth disappeared. There was no sound. Nothing at all. It was empty.

Everything around me was pitch-black.

I couldn't see.

My Power of Observation activated.

-Crack, crack, crack—!

A grinding noise echoed. The gears that had been turning smoothly were now tangled and stuck. Harsh screeches and sparks erupted. My brain felt like it was burning.

My thoughts slowed—down. The gears—in my mind—stopped turning. My cognition dulled. My overheated brain felt like it was melting.

—Some—thing——

Is—wrong—… —…?

My thoughts became jumbled and incoherent.

[Stop]

A faint sensation brushed over me. Gentle hands covered my 'eyes.'

Something enveloped me.

[Recover]

The chaotic thoughts ceased. My melting brain cooled down, and the halted gears began to turn once more.

An instant… or perhaps an eternity I couldn't perceive passed in that fleeting moment. I couldn't fully grasp what had just happened.

'What was that?'

My mind felt fuzzy. I had no idea what had just transpired.

[…Child]

A voice spoke from behind me.

At least, that's how I perceived it, but I wasn't entirely sure.

It was less a voice and more like… intent. The intent struck my mind directly, like telepathy.

It was a sensation I was somewhat familiar with. It felt like when I communicated with spirits, transmitting intent telepathically.

But this was much higher in level.

[Child]

Whose voice is that?

[Don't be reckless with your body]

Who is speaking to me?

[…And don't wander into dangerous places]

Why does this feel familiar?

* * *

My head was spinning.

The mana around me swirled chaotically.

"—?!…! —!"

"—!…!…!…!?"

"…! —!…!?…!"

My head pounded. The sounds entering my ears were a tangled, incomprehensible mess.

What's going on? What's been happening since earlier…?

I moved my body.

'Huh.'

It wouldn't move. Now that I thought about it, my body felt sticky, drenched with something.

And inside, I felt hollow, as though my insides had been scooped out…

I activated my Power of Observation.

I saw my own bloodied form, and the people around me desperately using every healing method they could, crying out in despair.

'What is this?'

It was happening again.

* * *

[The Curse of Silence is activated]

[The Curse of Loneliness is activated]

…

[The Master of The Tower of Growth intervenes]

[The Curse of Silence(?) is activated]

[A large amount of points is consumed]

…

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CHAPTER 166
A FAIRY'S RESOLVE

A storm had passed.

The dormitory, once filled with cries and screams, now sat in an eerie silence.

"What… just happened?"

Atra brushed her hair back as she spoke. The sticky jealousy that had surged within her earlier had been completely burned away by the events that had just transpired.

What had occurred was so intense and… terrifying that it seemed to have scorched everything else to ashes.

Everyone in the room understood exactly what Atra was referring to.

Although the room was packed with colorful individuals, it was spacious enough to accommodate them all.

Their gazes were locked on the bed.

There lay Lee Hayul, peacefully asleep as if nothing had happened, and next to him was Lee Seo-yul, who had cried loudly and fallen asleep while tightly clutching onto him.

Calling it "sleeping" might not be entirely accurate.

Usually, when someone coughs up that much blood and loses consciousness, you don't call it sleeping.

"Perhaps… could it be a restriction?" Liana suggested. Her face was pale,

worn out from the storm that had just swept through.

“Lee Hayul was about to say something, wasn’t he? But right before he could, he suddenly froze, his body trembled as if in a seizure, and then he vomited blood… Could it have been a backlash for breaking a restriction?”

“A restriction? Who would have placed such a powerful restriction on him, and when? Besides, wouldn’t he know the conditions of the restriction?”

Atra questioned her. Both she and Liana had fought on the frontlines of the African Demonic Realm, where they had encountered restrictions before, although rare.

That’s why Atra was skeptical.

Restrictions are extremely difficult to form in the first place, and one as powerful as this was almost unheard of.

The scene was still so vivid in her mind.

The blood that had gushed out as if it were being forced back through his seven orifices.

The foamy blood that clung to his lips, and the unknown, pulped flesh that spewed out with each violent cough.

His circuits had twisted and torn apart, his body convulsing as if in a fit.

‘…’

Just recalling it made Atra’s head throb, as if she might faint…

For such a powerful restriction to be in place, what kind of process would it have required? And for Lee Hayul not to be aware of the conditions, only to collapse while trying to reveal a secret?

And most importantly…

“The backlash was immediately followed by recovery… no, rapid regeneration, right?”

“It’s like giving him poison and an antidote at the same time… What kind of nonsense is this?”

After the backlash had turned him into a bloodied mess, time seemed to rewind, and his wounds healed as if they had never existed.

No matter how many times they checked, his body appeared perfectly fine.

Normally, a violation of a restriction’s conditions results in a backlash that leaves the victim crippled or dead.

But now, after inflicting immense pain, the body was restored?

A death by shock from pain? If the goal was to kill, it would have been easier to use that energy to finish him off.

“…We don’t even know for sure if it was a restriction. All we know is that he suddenly vomited blood and collapsed.”

“What the hell…”

No one could figure out the exact reason. Everyone’s faces grew darker.

Although they all knew Lee Hayul had some secrets, none of them had imagined this would happen just for him trying to reveal a bit of it.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s insides felt like they were burning. She couldn’t shake the feeling that Lee Hayul’s current state was somehow her fault.

She had prodded him about his secrets before. Was it possible that it had weighed on him, leading to these events? The guilt crept in…

Standing beside her, Elia was similarly tormented.

The image of Lee Hayul coughing up blood, as if throwing up pieces of his own organs, was still fresh in her mind.

No matter how much healing and regeneration she poured into him with her unique abilities, the blood wouldn't stop, his skin grew colder, and his breath became more labored… The thought made her go pale.

"Could it be a curse?"

A voice cut through the silence, drawing everyone's attention.

The mention of a "curse," a term so ominous, made everyone's faces stiffen.

The voice belonged to Baek Ahrin, her waist-length, water-colored hair and blue eyes standing out against the tension in the room.

She had remained silent, deep in thought until now, and as everyone turned to look at her, she shrugged slightly.

"There are curses where the conditions are met, but the person affected isn't aware of those conditions. There are plenty of curses like that."

"Considering he didn't know about the condition, it's possible it was a curse."

Liana nodded in agreement.

"But can a curse really come with such a severe backlash and condition? Wouldn't it lack the necessary power?"

"If it was carefully prepared and included a sacrificial ritual, I think it's possible. Especially since the backlash was powerful but didn't kill him, it's likely that non-lethal and regenerative conditions were added to it."

The conversation was mainly being driven by Liana and Baek Ahrin.

The others mostly listened, unable to contribute much due to a lack of specialized knowledge.

The discussion flowed smoothly, and Liana's eyes widened in surprise.

Baek Ahrin's knowledge of curses was far beyond what she had expected.

Even Liana, who was well-versed in magic, was amazed at how thoroughly Baek Ahrin understood not only the existence of curses but also their operating mechanisms.

"A curse, huh… That's a very niche field. Most people only learn how to counter curses and then move on, but you know a lot, don't you?"

They even taught black magic at Shio-ram. Although it was seen as a vile and distasteful art, it wasn't outright banned.

If it were completely suppressed, the knowledge of how to counter it would be lost as well. That's why various educational institutions included it in their curriculum.

However, it wasn't particularly popular. Most people only learned the basics of how to counter curses, rarely delving into the specifics of how they worked or were formed.

Advanced knowledge of curses was even rarer.

Yet, Baek Ahrin seemed to have a deep understanding of the advanced workings of curses.

"Well… there's no harm in learning," Baek Ahrin replied with a vague smile as she twirled a strand of her hair around her finger.

"Besides, I've always had a personal interest in it."

* * *

Sometimes, humans ponder the reason for their own birth.

Why was I born? What must I accomplish in life?

But for most humans, there is no reason behind their birth.

There's no special background, and only a few are born with the intent of achieving something specific.

Generally, humans aren't born with a purpose. They aren't created for a specific use.

A sword is crafted to cut and stab, but humans are not fixed in their roles.

"…Sniff…"

But Lee Seo-yul was different.

Tears clung to its eyes, emotions swelling within.

The young fairy, still too immature to fully understand its feelings, was caught in a whirlpool of emotions.

And the common thread among those emotions was all negative.

There was nothing close to happiness or joy.

That dark night.

Awoken by a deep sense of sorrow, Lee Seo-yul turned its head, quickly searching for Lee Hayul.

But he wasn't there.

Lee Hayul was lying on the opposite side, right next to Elia, sound asleep.

He had used Elia's arm as a pillow, his face buried against her side, breathing steadily.

"Sniff…"

Lee Seo-yul fluttered its wings.

Avoiding Elia's hand, it nestled itself between her and Lee Hayul, squirming until it clung tightly to him.

It might have shrunk in size, its body now smaller than before, but Lee Seo-yul didn't care. It pressed its face firmly against Lee Hayul's chest.

The sense of relief and warmth it felt was overwhelming.

The yellow human… Elia's embrace was warm too, but this… this was much better.

Only a few months ago, although it felt like ages, Lee Seo-yul had been an unhatched egg, drifting in a hazy consciousness, waiting for the day its master would awaken it.

It had no idea how much time had passed.

Its hazy consciousness and primal instincts had simply waited for the time to hatch.

Then, a stimulus arrived.

The presence of the master who would awaken it.

At the time, Lee Seo-yul had been certain.

It hadn't thought much about it.

There was a small sense of joy about finally hatching, but no grand excitement.

From birth, the fairy knew its role as a Fairy Knight.

It was to be a shield, a sword, a spear—armor designed to protect its master.

Its life, from start to finish, was to be lived with one absolute purpose: to protect its master.

The path ahead was already laid out.

As the predecessor Fairy Knight protected its master, Lee Seo-yul would grow quickly to maturity.

During that time, it would learn combat techniques and knowledge to protect its master.

And after reaching maturity, it would remain by its master's side for the rest of its life, fulfilling its role as a tool.

That's how it had thought.

Then, it felt a hand gently touch the surface of its egg.

The touch was as tender as if handling something fragile, and the warmth and affection that flowed from that hand shook Lee Seo-yul's mind.

A Fairy Knight that wasn't even born yet.

Having never experienced the world and forming its cold sense of self solely through implanted knowledge, Lee Seo-yul was overwhelmed by the wave of warm, tender emotions.

'Is this… the master?'

This was not the master it had imagined.

It had expected the master to be cold and calculating, leading their species with an iron will. But the actions of this person who held the egg were warm and gentle.

Holding onto the egg, their emotions radiated protection, concern, and care—so much kindness.

-Should we take just a bite?

The red human. The human woman made of fire had wanted to eat it.

-Just a little bite. It's so big, what's the harm? Hmm? What do you think?

It wasn't a joke. The fairy's natural sensitivity detected the truth in the red woman's words.

The red woman really intended to crack open the egg and eat the unhatched fairy inside…

-Ah, come on, Hayul. Aren't you curious about how it tastes? What if it's something strange? You'll regret it. I knocked on it, and it feels like there's something inside. Let's cook it and find out.

Next to her was the yellow woman. Despite the natural kinship Seo-yul felt with her, the words she spoke were horrifying.

It might have been a joke, but it wasn't entirely insincere.

They had talked about breaking the egg, pulling out its contents, grilling it on an iron pan, roasting it slowly, or even cooking the entire egg over an open flame. They'd said it was big enough to make a hearty meal…

Listening to these voices, imagining such a gruesome end, all Lee Seo-yul could do was tremble inside the egg in pure terror.

The one who had protected it from such threats was its master.

Compared to the other two humans, the master was small and frail, but they had held the egg tightly, shielding it from harm, desperately protecting it.

After hatching.

Lee Seo-yul, still too young and weak to protect its master, was instead cared for endlessly by Lee Hayul, who showered it with affection.

He gave it a name, dressed it in soft clothing, held it close so it wouldn't

shiver from the cold, and fed it warm meals whenever it was hungry.

At night, he would cradle it in his arms until it fell asleep, and every morning, he would wake it with a gentle smile.

It was all so touching, so heartwarming, but at the same time, it filled the fairy with a deep sense of helplessness.

For though it was still a child, Lee Seo-yul was, before anything else, a Fairy Knight.

A Fairy Knight's duty was to protect its master, yet here it was, being protected by its master.

The instincts of the Fairy Knight rebelled. A Fairy Knight born with a purpose shouldn't live like this.

Where were the previous Fairy Knights? Why was its master suffering alone? Where were the others of its kind?

These were not questions a Fairy Knight should be asking.

Lee Seo-yul was designed and born to protect the master.

It had a purpose.

There was a reason for its birth and a goal that must be achieved during its lifetime.

To protect its master.

That was the sole purpose of a Fairy Knight.

"Papa…"

But for a Fairy Knight who had yet to reach even a fraction of a year in maturity, the reality was too harsh.

Lee Seo-yul was still a young entity, not yet matured, and its master was still constantly exposed to danger, fighting alone.

Despite its resolve to fulfill its duty, Lee Hayul was constantly teetering on the edge of life and death.

With each passing day, Lee Hayul's vitality seemed to fade.

And Lee Seo-yul… was not by his side, unable to do anything.

Even now, when Lee Hayul had collapsed right in front of it, vomiting blood, there was nothing Lee Seo-yul could do.

It should have at least thrown its body out to shield its master, to act as a meat shield, but it couldn't even manage that.

Unable to suppress its emotions, Lee Seo-yul pressed its face against Lee Hayul's back, acting spoiled, rubbing its face in desperation.

'This can't go on.'

Lee Seo-yul bit its lip.

There were plenty of excuses it could make, but the harsh world wouldn't accept them.

'I need to… '

It had to grow.

Fairy Knights are known for their rapid growth. After all, they are designed to reach maturity as quickly as possible, so they can be used in combat.

But even that time felt too long.

There was no room for complacency.

Lee Seo-yul began to recall the information stored in its mind. It sifted

through the knowledge, picking out what was necessary.

The fairy fluttered its wings.

A fairy's wings are a symbol of their uniqueness, their special traits.

They are more than just beautiful or attention-grabbing; they serve a variety of functions.

Lee Seo-yul glanced sideways.

Hovering in the air was the blue cloth… Lee Hayul's artifact, the Wings of the Sky.

It was also Lee Hayul's wings.

Lee Seo-yul extended its wings, touching them to Lee Hayul's wings.

The wings trembled. Soon, 'information' began to flow through Lee Hayul's wings into the fairy.

'Faster… '

It was absorbing the knowledge required to reach maturity at an accelerated pace.

This happened two days before the start of the second semester.

* * *

[Fairy Knight 'Lee Seo-yul' is synchronizing]

[The Fairy Knight's growth is accelerating]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement in progress]

…

[Beauty?]: ?

[Fairy?]: ?

[Mental Damage]: Severe mental damage detected.

[Incomplete]: Fragmented and imperfect.

[Devoid of Vitality]: Lacking life essence.

…

[The Curse of Loneliness is activated]

[Curse of Loneliness: The pain cannot be shared]

[The Curse of Silence is activated]

[Curse of Silence: No help can be expected]

.

CHAPTER 167
THE START OF THE SECOND SEMESTER

Time had flown by.

The sun had set and risen countless times.

Soon, the warm and cozy spring weather passed, replaced by the scorching heat of summer.

The second semester had arrived.

This was an occasion to celebrate.

I should be standing up, clapping my hands, and blowing an elephant horn in self-congratulation.

Like the way we celebrate the 70th birthday of an elder who has survived the perils of life.

I felt the same way.

When I had just entered the Shio-ram dormitory, I was huddled in my room, scribbling notes on theories, and honestly, I feared I wouldn't make it past the second semester… that I might die before then.

But I'd made it.

I had survived, even though time had passed and every moment seemed uncertain.

…Of course, there had been numerous ups and downs along the way, but the important thing was that I was still alive.

At the moment, my life may still be hanging by a thread… but I couldn't just die quietly.

I congratulated myself on the achievement.

The streets leading to the academy were filled with students after a month-long break.

By the way, Seo-yul was being taken care of by Ariel, who was acting as Hong Yeon-hwa's attendant.

Just like the first semester, I left the dormitory and boarded an autonomous bus.

The stares directed at me from all around had become something I'd grown accustomed to.

-Baaaan…

But this time, the stares were even more blatant.

It was comparable to the beginning of the semester… no, maybe even worse.

I understood why.

I had caused quite a few incidents over the break.

First, the news that I had been included in the genealogy of the Gop-hwa Clan as a blood relative spread.

Not only that, but the news that I had manifested the unique ability, Gop-hwa, had also circulated.

However, the news about the Fenghuo Sword hadn't surfaced yet.

At the Gop-hwa Clan's annual gathering, I had drawn the Fenghuo Sword, the ancestral sword of the clan, and even stained it with my own energy.

There were quite a few who had witnessed that scene, but it seemed the clan managed to keep their mouths shut, at least for now.

Choi Jiyeon had personally informed me that the clan was still deliberating over the matter and would let me know the result later.

They must be having a hard time with it.

It was, after all, the Fenghuo Sword, a symbol of their founding ancestor.

A treasure filled with symbolic meaning, and I had casually stained it with my own power in front of an audience.

It was a relief I hadn't been scolded.

'Anyway.'

Though I hadn't officially changed my name to Hong Hayul, being acknowledged as part of the Gop-hwa Clan as a special entrant was already big news.

But that news was quickly overshadowed by the incident with the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

And that dragon had ended up losing its head because of me.

With two major incidents like that, it was no wonder people were staring.

-Baaaan…

…But the emotions behind those stares were quite peculiar.

Admiration, sympathy… or even envy would have been better, but instead, their gazes were lukewarm, almost indifferent.

Feeling my face heat up, I tugged on Hong Yeon-hwa's sleeve.

Her red eyes looked down at me.

“Let… let me down…”

“No.”

Her voice was firm as she immediately shot down my request.

Hong Yeon-hwa shook her head, holding me even tighter, making it clear that letting me down was out of the question.

Even though it was already the second semester, my appearance hadn’t returned to normal.

My hair was still white, and my body still small and frail.

“Why… why not…”

“Do you really need to ask, Hayul?”

Poke, poke… Elia, who was walking with us, prodded my cheek with her fingers.

Her yellow eyes silently asked if I really didn’t know the answer.

I turned my head slightly, pretending to ignore her gaze.

Was it two days ago?

I had collapsed, coughing up blood, and nearly missed attending the academy, all because they insisted I needed rest.

Unfortunately, both Professor Liana and Master had witnessed the incident, making it even harder to convince them otherwise.

After much pleading and reassuring everyone that I was fine, I barely managed to get permission to attend, though now, I was stuck like this.

It was as if they were treating me like a troublesome child.

The stares from others became even more peculiar.

'What a terrible way to start the morning… '

I couldn't bring myself to lift my head.

* * *

It wasn't until we entered the Ipchun classroom that I finally regained some semblance of freedom.

Hong Yeon-hwa had tried to hold me again, claiming my small stature would make it impossible for me to see from the chair, but I managed to get out of it by using the Wings of the Sky as a cushion.

Reluctantly, Hong Yeon-hwa sat beside me, her disappointment evident.

Our seats were the same as they had been in the first semester, in the very back of the classroom.

Originally, the seat by the window was mine, but Elia had taken it this time.

"Wow, you guys are early."

Baek Ahrin, who was also in the Ipchun class, arrived a few minutes later.

She clicked her tongue in disappointment when she saw Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia sitting on either side of me.

"You usually sit in the front. Why are you here?"

"You say that now? Elia used to sit in the front too, but you're only blaming me. That's discrimination!"

Baek Ahrin grumbled as she plopped down next to Hong Yeon-hwa.

The magical energy swirling in the air around me felt particularly complicated today.

To my left, warm yellow light shimmered, while on the right, red flames, cold ice, and water ripples flickered.

It was both comforting and chaotic at the same time.

A few moments later, the front door opened, and Professor Liana, our homeroom teacher, entered.

“It feels like I just saw you all yesterday, but here we are in the second semester already… Time really flies, doesn’t it?”

Standing at the podium, Professor Liana smiled brightly as she began the morning announcements.

“Since everyone is here on time, I’ll skip roll call. Let’s not waste time and get right into the announcements.”

All the students listened attentively to Professor Liana’s words.

Even though we’d been given the announcements beforehand, there was always a chance for changes, after all.

“Starting today, the free semester is over! That means you’ll all be choosing your own lectures to attend for the official semester.”

The first semester at Shio-ram tended to have a “taste test” feel.

Students were required to experience a variety of subjects, and based on that, choose their classes for the second semester.

As a result, the second semester was longer than the first.

“This week is course registration week. Most lectures will just be doing orientations or basic introductions. While you all got a taste of things during the first semester, things might be a little different now, so choose your courses carefully to make sure you have a smooth second semester!”

At Shio-ram, course registration happens at the start of the second semester, not during the break.

It might seem like a disorganized system, but given how well it's worked so far, it must be effective.

"I'm sure many of you have been looking forward to the second semester! The lectures tend to be shorter, and while extracurricular activities like clubs will add to your schedule, it's still better than the chaos of juggling a packed lecture timetable, right?"

Clubs also officially start in the second semester.

Technically, this is the first time for new students to join clubs.

There's a wide variety of clubs.

There are skill-based clubs, such as those focusing on swordsmanship, spear techniques, and archery, and academic clubs that tackle topics like monster hunting, dungeon analysis, and erosion studies.

There are also numerous hobby clubs, like baseball, soccer, table tennis, gardening, reading, and movie or music appreciation.

The primary purpose of Shio-ram's clubs is actually to provide students with leisure activities.

Most clubs exist to help students relieve stress, which is why many look forward to the second semester.

Clubs also serve as a great way to network.

Since entering Shio-ram proves a student's potential, simply graduating from here makes them a highly sought-after talent in the world outside.

Forming connections with fellow students isn't a bad idea.

And for students without a background, clubs can be a way to gain entry into a group.

Through such connections, students without lineage can find a household or group to belong to.

“And now for the last announcement!”

Professor Liana clapped her hands to emphasize her words.

The students straightened up in their seats as they focused on her next words.

“The second semester is when we kick off a long-standing tradition at Shio-ram… the Mentoring Program!”

Mentoring.

In many ways, it was one of the most important parts of the second semester.

“The Mentoring Program pairs first-year students with second-year students, and both the mentors and mentees can choose each other! Of course, you can refuse if you don’t want to participate.”

The mentoring system was something I had been looking forward to.

Choi Jiyeon, who had much to say about Seo-yul, was a second-year student, so I planned to apply and meet her as my mentor.

“This week is also the registration period for mentoring! Between course registration and mentoring, you’ll all be really busy this week!”

Professor Liana let out a sigh as she teased, earning a few nods of agreement from the students.

Indeed, this week was going to be packed.

In addition to registering for classes and mentors, students interested in clubs had to deal with that too.

Ironically, while the first week of the second semester was supposed to be more relaxed, it was busier than the first semester.

* * *

I hadn't finished my course registration yet, so I had the entire morning free.

As a result, I was left on my own, separated from the others.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia had been worried that I might suddenly collapse again, but I managed to slip away.

I did feel bad about it, but I had my own things to take care of.

Specifically, I wanted to try finding a way to return my body to normal.

-Ding!

As I walked, I sent a message through my smartwatch.

Satisfied with the "Message sent successfully" notification, I turned off the hologram.

Without wasting any time, I submitted a mentor request to Choi Jiyeon.

It was better to send it early rather than late to catch her attention.

'It would be nice if she accepts… '

A sense of worry crept in.

I had made a small connection with her in China before, but I wasn't sure if that would be enough for her to accept my request.

I wanted to solidify our relationship through mentoring.

But whether Choi Jiyeon would accept was a different matter.

If she refused, I would have no choice but to pursue another option.

-Ding!

'Hmm?'

Just as I was about to sigh and pull up the list of courses to register for, an alert popped up on my hologram.

[Unregistered contact: Identified – Choi Jiyeon]

▸ Choi Jiyeon: Hayul, first-year student

▸ Choi Jiyeon: If you've got some time, could we meet?

I blinked in surprise.

Choi Jiyeon had already replied.

'It's been less than a minute since I sent my request?'

Had she been checking her messages? But her response was so fast.

Puzzled, I sent a quick reply telling her I would meet her.

* * *

"Welcome, first-year…"

[?]

The sight that greeted me at the café was… shocking.

Choi Jiyeon's hair was a mess, dark circles like panda rings shadowed her eyes, and her complexion was so pale she looked like she belonged in a hospital bed.

Just by looking at her, it was clear she wasn't in a normal state.

'…What on earth happened?'

Why was Choi Jiyeon in this condition?

It made no sense.

CHAPTER 168
SELF-DESTRUCT?

"……"

"……"

A heavy silence filled the air.

It wasn't a pleasing silence, but rather an awkward and uncomfortable one.

Just a moment ago, I had reflexively blinked even though I couldn't technically see anything.

Lately, I had been trying to open and close my eyes more often, but I still felt more at ease keeping them shut.

That's how shocking Choi Jiyeon's current appearance was.

Her brown hair was so disheveled it looked like a bird's nest.

Dark circles hung beneath her eyes like a panda, and her skin was so deathly pale that she looked like she might collapse at any moment.

If I asked ten people, all ten would say she looked like she was about to faint.

Across from me, Choi Jiyeon seemed unaware of the reason for my shock, but she kept glancing at me nervously, as if she had committed some grave sin.

Her reaction left me bewildered.

The last time we had met was in China… in that urgent situation, and it had only been a brief encounter. What could she possibly have done wrong?

As far as I could remember, there was no reason for us to hold any grudges against each other.

We had both acted coldly and rationally, appropriate for the circumstances.

“Your body…”

Choi Jiyeon’s lips, which had been sealed tight, finally parted.

She hesitated, stumbling over her words, as if it was difficult to speak.

“Are you… is your body alright… No, I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant to say…”

Her words trailed off.

She mumbled something quietly to herself, then flailed her arms awkwardly, clearly flustered.

[My body is fine.]

[Ah.]

[Come to think of it, your injuries have healed as well, haven’t they?]

[I’m glad you’re safe… er, I mean…]

I had thought my words were a decent conversation starter, but Choi Jiyeon’s expression immediately darkened.

If her face had been like a cloudy, overcast sky before, it now looked like a full-blown thunderstorm was raging across her features.

‘Huh.’

Did I say something wrong?

Had I made a mistake? As that thought crossed my mind, Choi Jiyeon opened

her mouth again, haltingly.

"…I'm really sorry."

[What?]

Suddenly?

When I responded with confusion, Choi Jiyeon lifted her gaze from the floor, where she had been staring to avoid looking at me.

Her deep green eyes quietly observed me, then began trembling as if shaken by an earthquake.

…Was it because of how I looked?

'Oh.'

I wiggled my legs absentmindedly. My short legs didn't even touch the floor.

Come to think of it, the way I looked now was quite different from the last time Choi Jiyeon saw me.

Back then, my hair was a strange mix of white and black, like an animal shedding its fur. Now, it was completely white.

And on top of that, my body had physically regressed in age.

I was far from normal myself.

"That time… that time… I ran away and left you behind. I turned my back on you, terrified, just trying to save myself…"

Choi Jiyeon began speaking in a disjointed manner. Her words were jumbled, and her voice was trembling pathetically.

It seemed she was feeling guilty for running away and leaving me behind in China.

“I shouldn’t have run… I should’ve stayed even if it meant dying together… But I was scared, and because of me, you…”

Was her current haggard appearance the result of agonizing over this?

Choi Jiyeon continued to apologize over and over, clearly overwhelmed with guilt.

Watching her, I suddenly recalled what I knew about the original story.

Choi Jiyeon.

The eldest daughter of Choi Jia, the 11th head of the Taesan Clan, and future successor of the clan.

She was also an Awakener of Taesan.

Destined to become the next head of the Taesan Clan, which was known for producing large quantities of artificial elixirs.

She had been fed elixirs without restraint since childhood and had received the finest early education, supported by the extensive knowledge accumulated by the clan over generations.

Her talent was exceptional, allowing her to rise rapidly in skill, and she had entered Shio-ram as the top student.

Even now, her growth trajectory was steep, marking her as a future star.

She had a background that left nothing to be desired.

If you lined up all the people in the world, her status as a “diamond spoon” would place her at the very top.

“Sorry… I’m so sorry… because of me…”

Yet, despite her flawless background, Choi Jiyeon’s mental state was far from

healthy, and she was characterized by feelings of inferiority.

In the original story, whenever you built a connection with Choi Jiyeon, her emotional states would always display as [Strong outside, weak inside], [Inferiority complex], [Jealousy].

One of the traits of Taesan Awakeners was emotional stability, making her an unusual case.

In a way, it was absurd, but considering her environment, it wasn't completely incomprehensible.

Moreover, it wasn't a flaw that couldn't be overcome.

If someone could help her manage that fragile pride, Choi Jiyeon could become a truly reliable and dedicated ally.

That had been the case in the first playthrough of the original story.

In that first playthrough, where I diligently pursued side stories, I had developed a deep relationship with Choi Jiyeon, and her favorability had reached a very high level.

In the end, Choi Jiyeon had stayed by my side until the moment of my death, one of the few comrades who remained loyal.

[It's alright.]

[Really, it's okay…]

But I didn't have the ability to resolve Choi Jiyeon's inferiority complex…

The guilt she was carrying was so heavy that it seemed to be casting a dark shadow over the entire room.

Luckily, we were in a private room on the upper floor of the café, or else troublesome rumors might have started circulating if this had happened in a

public space.

[Please, don't torment yourself over it.]

[I don't regret what you did back then.]

[Because of you, many people survived, didn't they?]

[I'm one of the people who benefited from your help as well.]

I tried my best to speak calmly and offer her comfort.

I wasn't sure if I was overstepping, but Choi Jiyeon's mental state seemed precarious…

[In the end, I survived, and you're safe too.]

[Don't worry about my current condition.]

[I'll be back to normal soon enough.]

Whether my words had reached her or not, the lifeless look in Choi Jiyeon's eyes slowly began to fade, replaced by a faint glimmer of light.

'…That was tough… '

I breathed a sigh of relief inwardly.

For someone who's not good with words, that was an exhausting ordeal…

* * *

A while later.

Choi Jiyeon had managed to calm herself down and was now quietly sipping her coffee.

A bit of color had returned to her cheeks, likely from the embarrassment of

realizing how she had acted earlier.

She fiddled with the Necklace of Confession around her neck, her movements a little awkward.

[…So.]

[Are you feeling better now, Senior?]

'Ugh… '

The Necklace of Confession clicked as I spoke.

After my rather blunt question, I immediately realized how strange it sounded.

Asking if she was okay when she clearly wasn't…

"A… Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine. I've already fully recovered from my injuries… I just haven't been sleeping well lately."

She forced a smile, her lips curling awkwardly.

"Your sensory abilities are really impressive. Most people can't be that precise…"

Her attempt at a reassuring smile, combined with her clearly unwell appearance, only made her look more worn out.

In her obliviousness, Choi Jiyeon continued sipping her coffee through a straw.

'If you can't sleep, why are you drinking coffee…?'

I barely contained a grimace.

On the table in front of her were several empty plastic cups, all drained.

Even for a superhuman body, especially an Awakener of Taesan, there would be differences in how the body handled things, but even considering that, it was clear she had been downing coffee non-stop.

For someone who claimed to be suffering from a lack of sleep, this was far too much.

Still, I held back my thoughts and took a sip from my own drink.

A cold liquid filled my mouth.

It wasn't coffee, but orange juice. I wanted to ask why I wasn't given coffee, but I swallowed that question too.

Instead, I moved on to the main topic.

[Did you see the mentorship request I sent?]

[I sent it earlier…]

"Oh! Yes, yes, I saw it. That's actually part of why I wanted to meet."

Choi Jiyeon's voice trailed off.

Her strange reaction made me tilt my head.

[Do you already have someone else in mind?]

"No, I was actually thinking of you, Hayul."

My expression brightened at her words. I had been worried she might reject me, but it turned out that Choi Jiyeon had also been considering me as her mentee.

"But, I am a bit… concerned."

[Concerned? About what?]

“Um… Honestly, I feel like I don’t have much to teach you…”

Choi Jiyeon’s eyes darted around nervously before she took another sip of her coffee.

“From what I saw in China… you seem far more talented than me…”

‘Hmm… ’

Her words made me pull a strange expression.

More talented than her, huh…

There were many areas to consider, but in terms of combat, I didn’t think I would lose to her.

It wasn’t arrogance, just a calm assessment of my abilities.

When my fundamentals were still lacking, I hadn’t stood out, but once I had built up a solid foundation, the sheer variety of skills I possessed began to shine.

My unique abilities, Jack of All Trades and Mana Affinity.

Through them, I had mastered and was refining various techniques, including mana manipulation, body enhancement, qi techniques, combat skills, magic, and spirit arts.

In addition, I had acquired techniques and unique abilities through Ever-changing Swordsmanship and Homogenization, allowing me to copy and wield various special and elemental abilities.

I also had the Power of Observation and Power of Space.

Not to mention the stat boosts I received from the Proof of Protection on my left arm, as well as the protective abilities it granted.

And then there was the incredibly versatile Wings of the Sky, whose applications had grown significantly.

I had too many options at my disposal.

I could easily exploit weaknesses or nullify an opponent's attacks.

During the fight with the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, if I hadn't quickly copied a resistance ability to neutralize its venom, I would have died for sure.

Of course, combat wasn't the only thing a mentor could teach, but in a place like Shio-ram, where most of the students were aiming to become heroes, combat was the primary focus of mentorship.

Given that Choi Jiyeon had seen part of my battle with the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, it wasn't surprising she thought that way.

[Thank you for the compliment, but please don't say that.]

[There's so much I can learn from you.]

"…Really? Could you give me an example?"

[There's too much to list, honestly.]

[But if I had to pick one thing… I could experience your unique ability firsthand.]

"Taesan… I see…"

I managed to squeeze out a response.

Choi Jiyeon nodded in understanding, but when I mentioned wanting to experience Taesan, she suddenly flinched.

'…?'

After a brief moment of contemplation, Choi Jiyeon glanced at me nervously and hesitantly asked.

“You’ve experienced Taesan before, right? How was it?”

[Yes.]

[It was an incredible ability.]

[Thanks to you, I was able to conserve my stamina.]

That wasn’t a lie.

At the time, I had been preparing to use Spirit Form to escape the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, and the time Choi Jiyeon bought me had been invaluable.

If she hadn’t been there… my preparations would have likely become much more complicated.

[Thank you.]

“No, no, you don’t have to thank me… If anything, I should be the one thanking you a thousand times over…”

[I’ve received a lot of help from you as well.]

[Did you see it?]

[The pit where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon died.]

“Yes… I went there myself…”

[Your quick thinking made it possible.]

[If there had been anyone nearby, using self-destruct wouldn’t have been—]

“W-what did you just say? Self-destruct… self-destruct?!”

Choi Jiyeon's eyes widened in shock.

'Ugh.'

Her reaction, filled with shock and disbelief, made my mind go blank for a moment.

Now that I thought about it, I had chosen my words poorly.

Self-destruct. While it wasn't entirely inaccurate… No, it was kind of the mindset I had, but I didn't actually want to die…

My mind scrambled to fix the situation.

[…No? What do you mean, self-destruct? That's not what I—]

"S-self-destruct…"

It wasn't working.

Choi Jiyeon's mouth hung open, and a mixture of despair and guilt seeped out with the gasp that escaped her lips.

The glimmer of life that had returned to her eyes quickly dimmed once more, turning pitch black.

'Shit.'

[Shit.]

The Necklace of Confession clicked.

CHAPTER 169
EXPERIMENT (1)

The conversation with Choi Jiyeon, fortunately, ended without any major incidents.

Although the atmosphere plummeted due to my slip of the tongue midway through, I somehow managed to recover and wrap up the conversation peacefully.

In the end, the discussion concluded well.

The main topic, the mentorship issue, was resolved without any problems as we both chose each other.

More importantly…

“Since you helped me so much in China, I’ll make sure to repay you. If you ever need any help, feel free to reach out anytime.”

‘Oh.’

If I ever needed help, I could reach out anytime.

Given that this offer came from Choi Jiyeon, the heir of Taesan, it wasn’t a statement to be taken lightly.

At that moment, I couldn’t help but clench my fist under the table.

In truth, the main reason I wanted to build a connection with Choi Jiyeon was precisely to receive this kind of assistance.

I had planned to slowly build rapport through the mentoring activities and ask for help once we became closer, but she had already made the offer.

Who would have thought that the awful experience in China would come back to benefit me like this? It was fortunate amidst all the misfortune.

Although the misfortune had been quite significant, I decided to view it positively for now.

Of course, just because she said that didn't mean I was going to cancel the mentorship or stop building a relationship with her.

Even aside from the matter of Seo-yul, I stood to gain a lot from working with Choi Jiyeon as a mentor.

For example, steadily gathering information about Taesan's unique abilities through real-time observation.

It would be even better if Choi Jiyeon demonstrated how to use Taesan's abilities during our mentorship sessions.

Gathering information about Taesan was crucial.

Not only because Taesan was an extraordinarily powerful unique ability, but also because it might hold the key to restoring my body.

I finished the last bit of my orange juice and gave a small nod.

[Thanks for the drink.]

[Mu… thankyouoaaarghack.]

"Gasp… I-I'm sorry."

[No, it's fine.]

[Seriously, what is going on with this?]

[I apologize.]

"Yes, yes… understood, I'm sorry…"

Choi Jiyeon looked even more worn out than when we first met, her head hanging in exhaustion, and I couldn't help but feel a headache coming on…

In the original story, Choi Jiyeon had the same emotional deficiencies, but it wasn't this severe.

Even with her inferiority complex and jealousy, she was a straightforward and determined individual who acknowledged her shortcomings and moved forward.

She was always a reliable and mature leader who took the lead and shielded others from danger.

[Thank you.]

[I'll see you at the next mentorship session.]

"Yes, please take care on your way back…"

After repeatedly telling her it was fine and that it had been a mistake, I finally managed to part ways with Choi Jiyeon.

* * *

Having regressed physically had brought about many inconveniences.

There were countless things to list, but the one I was most aware of now was how short my legs were.

With shorter legs, my stride was smaller, making walking around much more troublesome.

No wonder Hong Yeon-hwa or Elia had insisted on carrying me everywhere.

Of course, even in this state, I still had a superhuman body, so I could run if I wanted to, but even then, I was slower than before.

And I looked ridiculous.

"…Um, excuse me, kid? Are you—"

[I'm Lee Hayul from Ipchun, Year 1.]

[Due to certain circumstances, my body has taken on this appearance.]

"Ah… I-I apologize for the mistake."

[Thank you for your understanding.]

On my way to my destination, several people approached me.

A passerby, probably a second-year based on the red tie, had tried to strike up a conversation with me.

I tugged at my cadet uniform, which had been custom-fitted to my smaller frame, and responded.

I knew he had good intentions, but I couldn't help but feel my expression sour.

The second-year student, looking flustered, quickly apologized and hurried off.

"……"

-Vrrrrr…

Behind me, the space distorted with a soft hum, and several wind spirits popped out.

'Carry me.'

Whirrr… A swirl of green light shimmered.

Soon, the wind wrapped around my body, lifting me off the ground.

Though the stares I got became even stranger, it was still better than walking awkwardly with my short legs.

-Hehehe.

"?"

Suddenly, the green light flickered, and I felt a sense of amusement, as if the spirits were chuckling.

'…You're not laughing at me, are you?'

The light didn't flicker in response.

* * *

At Shio-ram, only about 30% of the campus was regularly used by cadets and faculty.

The remaining 70% consisted of dungeons, monster breeding grounds, herb and raw material cultivation fields, and empty plots of land.

While dangerous areas like the monster breeding grounds required permission to access, the empty plots were freely accessible to the cadets.

These empty plots, known as the "blank zones," were more popular than one might think.

Spacious and sparsely populated, they were perfect for conducting various experiments.

I often came here myself.

Ever since I discovered Homogenization, I had been loitering around these zones, conducting experiments on my abilities.

'…No traces.'

I pressed my foot into the ground. The fresh grass crumpled under the pressure.

This was the spot where I had unleashed Gop-hwa previously, but I had cleaned up any evidence before leaving to ensure no one would notice.

Even now, upon closer inspection, no traces remained.

Though it was difficult to detect leftover fragments, especially since it wasn't during the moment of manifestation, I couldn't afford to take any chances.

While it didn't matter anymore if Gop-hwa was exposed, letting anyone discover Changhae or Taesan would be much harder to deal with.

It could lead to a repeat of the third playthrough's chaos…

'No people, no surveillance magic… '

I scanned the surroundings with my observational abilities, expanding my range to the maximum. There were no people nearby, and no surveillance magic was present.

I also scattered spirits around the area to double-check.

Only after confirming did I finally sit down with a sigh.

I was on a flat, grassy field, with no trees or obstacles, allowing the wind to blow through comfortably.

'Alright, let's start with Taesan.'

Taesan.

Just manifesting it would cause my physical abilities to skyrocket and grant me dominion over the earth.

If developed further, I could control life force and death energy.

It was also the ability that might hold the key to restoring my body.

The second tower entrance exam was scheduled for the beginning of the second semester. Before then, I wanted to return my body to normal.

There was a lot to do, but first and foremost, I needed to fix my body.

I emptied my mind and focused my concentration.

* * *

Venus's office was located on the top floor of the central administrative building at Shio-ram.

As such, very few people came and went from there.

Those who did visit were usually reporting on very important matters face-to-face.

Consequently, Venus's office was always quiet.

Not just in terms of noise, but the very atmosphere was calm and serene, creating a sense of tranquility.

"……"

But today, that wasn't the case.

Her skin tingled. The constant pressure in the air disrupted the stillness and continuously irritated Venus.

The feeling wasn't quite murderous intent, but it carried enough displeasure and discomfort to break her concentration.

"I expected you to visit eventually, but I didn't anticipate your visit would come this soon."

Eventually, Venus sighed and lowered the documents she was holding.

She turned her gaze toward the woman sitting on the guest sofa.

Her sharp golden eyes gleamed fiercely.

It was Atra Clyde, exuding an intense and hostile aura.

Atra, who had been sitting in silence as if she were meditating, finally opened her mouth.

“You expected it… So you also know why I’m here?”

“No, to be precise, I anticipated you would visit regarding Lee Hayul, but I don’t know the specifics.”

“Judging by your expression, it seems you’re aware of the reason after all.”

“Not certainty, just speculation.”

Venus shook her head in denial.

“I don’t possess any abilities related to psychological insight. And of course, nothing of that sort would work on someone like you, Hero Atra.”

“I’m not skilled with words.”

Atra spoke abruptly.

“My personality is quite poor, hence I lack any real social skills. So, like before, I’ll get straight to the point.”

Atra tilted her head.

“Lee Hayul. Tell me everything you know about that child.”

The conversation came to a sudden halt.

Though the oppressive aura around Atra had subsided, awkward silence filled the room.

Venus blinked. Her emotionless, violet eyes stared at Atra.

"…You've grown quite fond of Cadet Lee Hayul."

"If I didn't care, I wouldn't have come asking."

Atra responded, tilting her head to the side in a sarcastic manner.

In reality, Atra hadn't initially intended to dig into Lee Hayul's background.

She hadn't planned to get involved at all.

She had simply thought to give him enough training so he wouldn't die pointlessly, and that would have been the end of it.

No interference, no protection—just helping him grow stronger and then walking away.

But she couldn't do that anymore.

Atra wasn't as detached as she thought she was, and Lee Hayul had become much more important to her than she had anticipated.

She could no longer ignore him.

If Lee Hayul were to die meaninglessly in some unknown place… it wouldn't just be a minor regret like before.

She had been through it once already—the feeling of being thrown into a bottomless abyss, that wretched sensation…

That was why she had come to see the Vice Principal. She couldn't meet with the Principal, but the Vice Principal was accessible enough.

She couldn't directly ask Lee Hayul either.

She had personally witnessed Lee Hayul collapse, coughing up blood, just as he was about to reveal his secrets a few days ago.

As a result, Atra wasn't in the mood to be patient.

She couldn't ask Lee Hayul. But surely, the person who brought him in, the one who arranged his special admission, would have the answers.

She had come to find out the truth, but so far, no answers had been given.

"Is this a difficult question to answer?"

Venus hadn't responded yet. She seemed to be assessing something as she stared at Atra.

Growing impatient from the prolonged silence, Atra's eyes sharpened.

The intangible pressure in the room grew stronger.

Her intentions were clear—she needed an answer, one way or another.

It was a very rude and aggressive move, but Atra had no intention of backing down.

After seeing the cursed or bewitched state Lee Hayul was in, she needed at least some answers.

Seeing the determination in Atra's gaze, Venus finally opened her mouth.

"I can give you an answer, but I doubt it will fully satisfy your curiosity."

Atra frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I don't have the knowledge necessary to fully answer your questions. In other words, I don't know much either."

Venus shook her head as if to emphasize her point.

"I've only done a few things. I merely followed the Principal's instructions

and acted accordingly."

"What have you done?"

"One thing was to prepare basic arrangements for a special admission candidate, long before they were to be admitted."

It was the first time Atra had heard this.

As far as she knew, no special admissions had been made aside from Lee Hayul, and she hadn't heard any rumors about future special admissions either.

And considering Venus had used the phrase 'long before,' it certainly wasn't a matter of just a few years.

Had preparations for Lee Hayul, or whoever the special candidate was, been made that far in advance?

Atra crossed her arms and listened intently.

"The second task, which I carried out earlier this year, was to find Lee Hayul's empty shell and grant him the right to special admission."

"…Empty shell?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. To put it bluntly, the Lee Hayul I met at the time was an empty shell."

Atra's expression twisted as she tilted her head.

Empty shell… It didn't sound good. It wasn't a term that should be used to describe a person.

"An empty shell… That's an unpleasant and hard-to-understand phrase."

"It's difficult to explain. I didn't fully grasp it myself, and I'm also bound by

some confidentiality regarding the Principal, so I can't explain it in great detail. But simply put…"

Venus paused, contemplating how to phrase her words.

It wasn't a refusal to answer, but more like she was weighing her options, so Atra waited quietly.

"The Lee Hayul I met at that time wasn't a normal human."

"For example?"

"He was simply waiting idly, only moving when given instructions. If he couldn't complete the task, he would malfunction, and after completing the task, he would just wait for the next command… In short, a machine."

There was no intention to demean. From Venus's objective point of view, Lee Hayul had been nothing but a shell.

But the next time she met him, Lee Hayul had entered Shio-ram as a normal human.

"…And after that, he became as you know him, Hero Atra."

Though he had appeared terrified and unstable, he was clearly thinking and acting like a normal person.

"I don't know what was done to Lee Hayul, and even if I did, I don't believe I can provide any further answers."

I hope you understand.

With those words, Venus closed her mouth.

* * *

The sofa Atra was sitting on was incredibly soft, and the faint scent of

flowers in the room was soothing.

But Atra's expression remained tense.

Sitting stiffly, she crossed her legs.

'…This is giving me a headache.'

The information she had just learned was bizarre and alien, enough to make her head throb. Rubbing her temple, she glanced across the room.

Venus, the Vice Principal, sat across from her, tending to a potted flower with the usual indifferent look on her face.

Despite her seemingly indifferent expression, her hands were incredibly gentle as she handled the flowers.

It was as if she were dealing with a delicate and expensive piece of art.

Atra spoke up quietly.

"I didn't know you were into gardening."

"It's not really a hobby."

Venus, who had been carefully inspecting the flowers, responded. She glanced at Atra, who looked conflicted, then lightly stroked the stem of the plant.

"No one else takes care of them, so I've been forced to do it."

"For something that's not your hobby, you seem to handle them quite affectionately."

"After a while, you start to grow attached. I recommend you try it, Hero Atra, when you have some free time."

"If I ever find the time, I might."

Atra shook her head and rose from her seat.

“I’ll take my leave now. Your answers… they weren’t exactly satisfying, but I appreciate the information.”

“Please, take care.”

-Clank.

“By the way, that flower is called Agapanthus.”

As Atra opened the door to leave, Venus added a final comment.

“It’s an uncommon flower, but it’s quite resilient, making it perfect for beginners. Consider it if you ever decide to start gardening.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The door shut with a thud.

The office returned to its usual silence.

Venus stared at the door for a moment before lowering her gaze back to the flower… specifically, the purple-leaved Agapanthus.

With an indifferent expression, Venus gently stroked the petals.

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CHAPTER 170
EXPERIMENT (2)

I focused my mind and began channeling my mana.

Mana surged forth. As if waiting for this moment, the mana sprang from my core and raced through my circuits at lightning speed.

The mana rippled across my body.

It was easily twice as clear and powerful as before.

The effects of The Lake of Mana were incredibly sweet.

Though my trip to China had been a total disaster, with things like the Proof of Protection and the other spoils, it wasn't all bad if you considered the gains.

While I was processing all this, I manipulated the mana with a slightly curious expression.

'The color changed.'

Before, my mana had been a light sky-blue, but now it was different.

White.

It had turned pure white, as if it were matching the color of my hair.

It felt strange, but it wasn't a bad thing.

The change in color was just a side effect.

The real issue was the purity of my mana.

After bathing in The Lake of Mana once and then being struck down by the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, which caused my body to regress in age, my mana had undergone two transformations.

Strictly speaking, the transformation was a rise in mana purity.

And it was a significant increase.

Previously, my mana was already incredibly clear and pure, but compared to now, it was as if my old mana had been murky water.

Thinking back, my mana had started to feel a little off after my first bath in The Lake of Mana. Perhaps that was a sign of the color change to come.

'…It's all white. Am I going gray?'

Anyway, it was a good thing in the end.

The purity of my mana had improved significantly.

On a whim, I cast a spell.

-Whoosh!

A fireball formed at my fingertip.

'Oh… What the.'

I blinked in surprise.

Normally, a fireball would be about the size of my fist, but this one was as big as my entire body. I compressed it until it was fist-sized again.

As the size shrank, its density increased, and the power became even more intense.

I snapped my fingers. The fireball, trailing a red tail of flame, shot downwards and landed a short distance away.

-BOOM!

‘Whoa… ’

A fierce blast of wind followed.

Before it could hit me, the Wings of the Sky spread out and blocked the wind.

The ripped-out grass scattered into the air.

Once the wind died down and the Wings of the Sky returned to their place, I examined the spot where the fireball had landed.

It was a mess.

A massive crater had formed, large enough to bury a dozen of me, and flames flickered from within.

The grass around the impact site was torn out, revealing the brown soil underneath.

‘Oh wow… ’

The power was incredible. The fireball was a low-tier spell, yet its destructive force easily outstripped that of a mid-tier spell.

‘If I adjust the incantation and reinforce it with the Power of Space… ’

It would be even more powerful. For a moment, I envisioned a bright future.

I could fire off dozens of these fireballs per second. I could even mix in other elemental projectiles or mana bullets.

There was no need to worry about running out of mana. With Mana Affinity, I could absorb the surrounding mana without a problem.

If I improved my magic skills, the possibilities were limitless.

‘This semester, I should invest in magic.’

The potential of magic was shining brightly. Honestly, I had been too focused on physical abilities and combat techniques recently.

For the sake of balance, it was about time I invested in magic as well.

I also planned on making some gear in the second semester… and I wanted to dabble in necromancy through Taesan.

I had gathered so much information on necromancy during my time in China. Even though the source left a bad taste in my mouth, the information was too valuable not to use.

Once I got the hang of it, there was a particular soul I wanted to raise with necromancy.

It was something I had been putting off, unsure what to do with it, but now that things had come to this, I might as well use it myself.

If I couldn’t turn it into a proper undead due to my lack of skill… well, I could always use it as material for crafting gear.

‘…There’s a lot to do.’

I’d keep a low profile in the second semester.

Honestly, I had been too reckless during the first semester despite being weak.

Of course, I’d still intervene if something was about to blow up and I had to act immediately…

I let out a deep sigh and expanded my unique ability.

Unique Ability: Taesan.

The unique ability belonging to the Taesan Clan, one of the Three Great Clans.

Previously, I had only observed the abilities of Taesan without manifesting them, but during my time in China, I had gathered a decent amount of information from observing Choi Jiyeon's use of Taesan.

'Homogenization, Taesan.'

I mimicked the observed information and applied it to myself.

With the help of Mana Affinity, I slowly changed the smallest manipulatable unit of mana as if replacing the parts of a machine.

The process was smoother than before. After visiting The Lake of Mana, controlling my mana had become significantly easier.

-Vrrrr…

The sensation expanded.

I felt a strange connection, as if I had become one with the ground. It was as though the earth had become an extension of my body.

It felt like I was holding the land in my hands.

'…Hoo… '

The rippling mana stilled. After adjusting to the sensation for a moment, I checked over my body.

There were no abnormalities. My organs didn't feel like they were about to turn to mush, and there was no sign that my circuits were about to blow up.

I had been worried that using three core abilities simultaneously might cause problems, but fortunately, there were no such signs.

The only changes were in the nature of my mana… and a slightly calming sensation.

It wasn't fiery and overwhelming like Gop-hwa, nor was it cold and emotionless like Changhae.

It was somewhere in between.

In a positive light, you could say it was just right. In a negative light, it felt indifferent, like nothing mattered.

'Is the side effect of Taesan emotional neutrality…? I'm not sure yet.'

To be honest, calling Taesan's side effects "side effects" was a bit of a stretch.

Since one of its main traits was temperance, it didn't lead to extreme situations like Gop-hwa or Changhae.

In fact, maintaining a level of calm during battle could be seen as a benefit.

However, even Taesan had to be used with caution. If I recklessly overused it, ignoring its side effects, my body could harden into stone and return to the earth…

The unique abilities of the Three Great Clans required not just skill but careful management of their side effects.

I let out a deep sigh and manipulated the earth.

-Rumble…

The ground in front of me surged up. A massive mound of dirt, over ten times my size, shot up instantly. Mixed in with the dirt were small rocks.

'…Like this?'

I manipulated it again.

The mound of dirt wriggled and formed into a spherical shape. Then, five extensions sprouted from it.

It was a hand made of dirt.

'Rock, paper, scissors.'

-Rumble… The fingers folded in and out, then wiggled back and forth as if waving.

'It's working fine.'

There was no hitch.

The basic ability of Taesan—control over the earth. With more mana, I could manipulate a wider area or even create dirt and rocks from scratch.

'Body enhancement is applied as well.'

I picked up a rock from the ground and gripped it tightly. With a squeeze, the rock crumbled like tofu.

When Taesan is activated, it greatly enhances basic physical abilities.

The enhancement overlaps with some aspects of Gop-hwa.

But there are differences.

Gop-hwa's physical enhancement provides a high burst of strength for a short time, while Taesan focuses on sustained increases in endurance and stamina.

In other words, Gop-hwa excels in short bursts, while Taesan is better suited to prolonged struggles.

In long battles, Taesan holds the advantage.

Compared to Changhae, Changhae's energy can instantly be used to heal the

user and others, while Taesan requires more experience to direct its energy externally.

However, the dirt and rock controlled by Taesan are tougher than the ice of Changhae. In terms of defense, Taesan surpasses Changhae.

'Hmm… '

I had confirmed control over the earth and body enhancement.

One last thing remained.

This was the real goal.

Taking a deep breath, I focused on a new sensation.

'…… '

The connection to the earth. Within the oneness I felt with the ground, I sensed abundant life energy.

Countless mounds of dirt, with various insects and sands buried within, rocks, grass, and their roots. Sparse vegetation grew in the distance.

Though their size varied, all of them held life energy, proving they were alive.

The perception and manipulation of life energy. From this stemmed self-recovery and the use of necromancy.

Of course, the amount of life energy differed.

For instance, the withered leaves far away had very little life energy. Like a well running dry, the life energy was nearly depleted, inching toward death.

'Damn… '

It wasn't just the leaves.

My heart sank. The warmth I had felt a moment ago plummeted into the depths. The cold wind against my skin became unbearably sharp.

The earth was brimming with life energy. But to me, sitting on top of it… I had almost none.

The contrast was chilling.

In terms of proportion, I was no different from those withered leaves. I was on the verge of hitting rock bottom.

What happens when I reach the bottom?

When all the life energy is drained, and there's nothing left?

'Death.'

The answer came easily. Just as I had predicted the end of the leaf, I could now see the end of my own life.

The Curse of Short Lifespan.

I had been feeling fear. Most of that fear came from the unknown—an uncertainty of when I might suddenly drop dead.

But now the unknown had been revealed, the darkness lifted.

Death had become visible.

'I won't die.'

I gritted my teeth.

I activated the sensation again. I tapped into the life energy of the earth I was perceiving.

It was an unfamiliar sensation.

It felt as though a new organ had grown in my body, something I wasn't used to.

'It's similar to mana. I can control it.'

But it wasn't impossible.

It was much like when I first learned to control mana. I extended my control and grasped the life energy of the earth.

It wasn't easy to manipulate. It was an enormous mass, far too large to handle all at once. I tore off a small part of it.

The burden eased. Like yanking someone by the hair, I pulled the life energy toward me.

I guided it into my body.

A body that had been an empty vessel slowly began to fill with life energy.

Before I unleashed the three core abilities to fight the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, I recognized that my life energy was lacking.

Immediately afterward, I had suffered severe injuries, lost consciousness, and upon waking, I found that my body had regressed.

I speculated that my body had shrunk due to the lack of life energy.

Normally, a body would be filled with life energy, but I didn't have enough to sustain my original size. As a result, my body shrunk to match the limited life energy.

It might just be speculation, but I deemed it highly likely.

So I had planned to recharge my life energy using Taesan.

'Huff… '

It wasn't going smoothly.

The life energy resisted, bouncing back like an incompatible plug trying to fit into a socket.

The harsh rejection made me realize this wouldn't be easy.

I sighed deeply and resumed manipulating the life energy.

'…I won't die.'

I summoned a rebellious determination. I forced my deflated emotions to swell with resolve.

'I won't die.'

In the past… even when I was a nobody, stuck alone in my room with zero connections, there was no way I would've died quietly. Now, with so much at stake, I refused even more.

I want to live with the people who care about me.

There's no way I'll die just like this. I want to live a long, happy life.

I pushed the fear away and solidified my will.

Refocusing, I concentrated harder on manipulating the life energy.

* * *

Atra left the central administrative building, her mind full of conflicting thoughts, and headed toward the training grounds.

It was an old-fashioned training ground without any special equipment.

It was a place where Atra always met with Lee Hayul to train one-on-one… a space that had grown dear to her over time.

Someone else was already waiting there.

It was Liana, who had come after finishing the morning assembly for Ipchun and handling other duties.

“An empty shell… It’s not just a simple metaphor, is it? What could it mean?”

Having heard the story Atra had shared about her conversation with the Vice Principal, Liana furrowed her brows and folded her arms under her chest.

Her expression showed clear signs of contemplation.

As a result, her already large chest was further accentuated.

“……”

Atra, who had been relaying the story, suddenly fell silent and glared at the ample flesh.

It wasn’t an unusual action. Atra herself unconsciously did similar things from time to time.

But for some reason, it annoyed her.

A few days ago… when people had gathered at Lee Hayul’s dorm, and she had seen Lee Hayul rush into Liana’s arms, that cow-like body had started to bother her.

Thinking back, she had felt strange ever since then. Seeing all those colorful women gathered in her disciple’s room had not been a pleasant sight.

But now wasn’t the time to dwell on trivial matters like Liana’s chest. The situation called for more focus.

Atra continued speaking.

“…Even the Vice Principal said she didn’t know the full details. I can’t say for

sure if it's the truth, but she's not the type to lie."

"Hmm… If the Vice Principal doesn't know, who else could? The Principal? The Association heads? I haven't heard of anyone meeting with them for decades… Are they even still alive?"

"As long as the blessings from the Principal are maintained, he's still alive. The same goes for the Association heads. But even if they're alive, it would be hard to find them, and if they're dead, there's no way to ask them for answers."

"And we can't just ask Cadet Lee Hayul directly… He might have another seizure like last time."

Liana and Atra both fell silent.

It was a deeply complicated issue.

"Taking care of one kid is so difficult…"

At Liana's sigh, Atra found herself nodding without realizing it.

Though Lee Hayul was undoubtedly a lovable child, he was also quite a troublemaker, constantly giving her heart no rest.

"…!"

Atra's head whipped around. Liana, who had only just received the report from her spirit, also turned her head.

Someone was approaching from afar.

It was a familiar presence—Lee Hayul's.

"Hmm…?"

But something felt different.

Lee Hayul had always had a faint presence.

Over time, that presence had become so light that even Atra and Liana struggled to sense it, especially in his regressed state.

It had gotten so faint that it seemed like it would vanish if blown by the wind, worrying those around him.

But now, his presence had changed.

In a good way. The faint presence had swelled considerably.

Atra and Liana both felt something strange. How should they describe it?

It was like a child who had been scrawny from lack of food suddenly gorging themselves and becoming plump.

At any rate, it wasn't a bad feeling.

Soon, Lee Hayul came into their view.

-Whimper…

"…!?"

Lee Hayul appeared, looking distinctly forlorn.

For some reason, he was floating toward them, wrapped in wind currents, and moving at quite a fast pace. He was approaching quickly.

Thanks to this, his tearful expression was clearly visible.

Their hearts sank.

What trouble had this mischievous little one gotten into this time?

Startled, Atra rushed forward, arms outstretched.

Her immediate action was to pull him into her embrace to comfort him.

-Thud.

“Ah?”

“Huh?”

She was blocked. Something had gotten in her way, and the impact pushed her back several steps.

Atra turned her head. She saw Liana blinking her green eyes in surprise.

Liana also turned her head. She saw Atra blinking her golden eyes in confusion.

They both had awkward, hunched postures.

Arms outstretched, stepping forward to embrace something, only to be pushed back by an unseen force…

“……”

“……”

There was an odd atmosphere between them.

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CHAPTER 171
MUST BE NICE HAVING SO MANY MOMS (1)

In terms of results, today was a failure.

I had struggled for hours, but there was no clear outcome.

‘Wanting everything to go perfectly from the start… yeah, that’s greedy.’

I flew through the air with the help of the Wind Spirit, reflecting on my failure.

‘Life energy… It’s hard to handle. Is it this difficult for everyone? Or is it easier for me because of Mana Affinity?’

Mana Affinity. It makes it easier to control not just mana but other elemental forces as well, so life energy should be within my reach.

Life energy is an ambiguous and ridiculously difficult force to manipulate.

The number of people who can even perceive and control life energy is extremely rare. Even necromancers rarely deal with it.

Taesan’s ability to perceive and manipulate life energy, not to mention enabling self-recovery and necromancy through life energy, is truly exceptional.

‘But if I keep at it, I think I’ll get there… ’

Although it’s difficult to control, it’s not impossible. Plus, when I forcefully stuffed life energy into my body, I felt like there was a slight change.

The amount of life energy I could absorb was tiny—barely the size of a grain of rice. And even that immediately leaked out again.

Still, I sensed something peculiar in between.

It was similar to the sensation I had when growing up, like the feeling of your limbs stretching.

If that's the case, then this method might be correct.

It's as if I was supposed to build a two-story house with life energy, but due to a lack of materials, the result has been downsized.

Life energy seems to be directly tied to my lifespan, too.

In any case, as long as I continue to fill my body with life energy, I should be able to solve several problems.

Of course, it's not a fundamental solution—more like pouring water into a bottomless jar. But still, I have to try.

'Let's resolve this before the Tower of Growth.'

The entrance exam is soon.

The theme of the first exam is survival. They drop the cadets on the first floor of the Tower and let them fight it out.

If things go as they did in the original story, the second exam's theme will be reflection.

Reflection.

In a broad sense, it means to look into the essence of something. As soon as the cadets enter the Tower of Growth, they will confront a reflection of themselves.

The challenge will be to defeat the mirror image of themselves in a one-on-one duel, like a cliché battle from a comic or game.

‘If I enter looking like this… will the reflection come out the same?’

My face twisted at the thought.

Imagining it made me cringe.

No matter what methods I use, ultimately, it’ll just be two short, chubby little kids flailing their limbs while fighting…

I want to avoid that.

There’s a lot to do, but I should focus on restoring my body first.

The Wind Spirit gently carried me through the air.

We weren’t flying too high, just hovering a few meters above the ground, moving quickly.

–… What’s that?

– How ridiculous. What’s over there… What the heck is that?

The bizarre sight attracted a flurry of glances.

It’s not like flying was an unusual sight.

Most people can fly once they’ve mastered magic to a certain degree. It’s not uncommon to see someone soaring through the air when they’re in a hurry.

But my case was different. Not because I wanted the attention, but because my appearance was so unusual that it was hard not to draw stares.

My hair had turned pure white, like snow.

A flowing blue cloak trailed behind me like a banner.

Despite wearing the academy uniform, my body was small… very small.

That combination made me the center of attention wherever I went.

At least my prosthetic arm was less noticeable thanks to the long sleeves, which gave me some relief as I let the wind carry me.

My destination was the old training grounds.

That's where Master and Professor Liana would be waiting.

Even though I haven't yet registered for my classes, I'm still receiving guidance from Master and Professor Liana, just like usual.

They also mentioned giving me advice about class registration, so I plan to discuss that with them today.

"……"

"……"

'…?'

When I arrived at the old training grounds, I sensed an odd atmosphere.

Master and Professor Liana were standing awkwardly, facing each other, locked in a silent stare.

The emotions in their glances were incredibly complex.

Their gazes clashed in the middle, as if an invisible force was pushing against one another.

[Master?]

[Professor Liana?]

The click of my necklace broke the silence. At the sound of the flat, emotionless voice from the necklace, the strange tension between them dissipated.

Both pairs of eyes shifted toward me.

“Ah… You’re here early.”

Master was the first to speak.

Clearing her throat, she spoke in a gentle tone.

The stiffness in her expression melted away, and the corners of her eyes, which had been raised in irritation, softened.

The unease that had quietly crept into my heart settled back down.

The Wind Spirit taxi, which had stopped momentarily due to the odd atmosphere, resumed moving.

“But your face doesn’t look so good. What did you get into this time… No, never mind.”

Master suddenly clamped her mouth shut. Furrowing her brows as if she was annoyed, she swallowed the sigh that was about to escape.

“I’m afraid to ask in case something else blows up.”

[Sorry…]

[I just went to experiment with some abilities…]

At the scolding look she gave me, as if I were a troublesome little child, my body shrank involuntarily.

I wanted to protest, but my guilty conscience kept me from saying anything.

“Don’t shrink like that.”

Seeing my reaction, Master’s expression softened as she reached out her hand.

I knew exactly what that gesture meant.

The Wings of the Sky fluttered gently.

Riding the wind, she was about to pull me into a tight hug…

“Why are you scolding him like that?”

Another voice interrupted, halting our movements.

Master’s face twisted as she glanced to the side.

It was Professor Liana, who met Master’s gaze with a reproachful look before turning to me.

Her green eyes softened into a gentle smile.

At that moment, something strange happened.

A radiant aura surrounded Professor Liana.

She spread her arms wide, her ample chest opening invitingly.

The combination of her kind smile and open arms gave off a motherly aura, as if she would accept any whining or complaints with open arms.

I felt like I could bury my face in her chest and cry, and she would pat my back and comfort me…

‘…?’

That thought stirred something within me.

Bury my face and cry? Have I ever done that with Professor Liana…?

Have I ever…?

My memory felt hazy. It seemed like I had… but at the same time, maybe I

hadn’t…

What is this?

[Familiarity]

[Warmth]

[Attraction]

[Like]

Several emotions were blended together like a mishmash of dough, but none of them felt bad.

[Soft]

In fact, it felt rather comforting…

“My disciple…?”

[Hmm?]

Master’s voice entered my ears.

Her tone was filled with a pitiful tremble, as if she couldn’t believe what was happening, causing me to snap out of it.

What’s going on? I turned my head to look.

…I had stopped moving?

‘Huh?’

That’s when I realized something was wrong.

My position had changed.

Somehow, I was drifting toward Professor Liana, not Master.

Without a second thought, I was floating over, aiming to nestle into Professor Liana's open arms.

[Confusion]

[Familiarity]

There was no hesitation. It felt as if that was where I was supposed to be…

'Huh?'

I tilted my head in confusion.

Even now that I was aware of it, I didn't feel like resisting. Instead, a warm sense of comfort washed over me, making me want to nestle in her embrace and fall asleep.

That's when it happened.

"Ah…! Spirit magic…!"

Master's eyes widened as she exclaimed in realization.

'Oh… '

Her remark cleared the fog in my mind.

Spirit Affinity. Professor Liana's unique ability. I assumed I was affected by it, and it seems that something similar was at play right now.

Master's body trembled. Her eyes narrowed in anger as she pointed an accusing finger at Professor Liana.

"You… You sneaky witch…!"

"Sneaky? What did I do to deserve such slander?"

Professor Liana blinked innocently, her surroundings growing even brighter. The Wings of the Sky fluttered gently.

Master's body trembled even more at the sight.

"What else am I supposed to call your underhanded tricks? Wipe off those pheromones right now!"

"Pheromones…? What are you talking about? I haven't done anything. Are you sure you're not just imagining things?"

The exchange escalated.

Master shot sharp words, while Professor Liana responded playfully, feigning ignorance.

It was a familiar scene. After thinking about it, I realized I had often observed Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin bickering like this.

[Hold on…]

[Wait a minute…]

But still, what's happening now is its own thing.

I hurriedly stepped in between them.

Their argument came to an abrupt halt.

Both sets of eyes zeroed in on me.

I had cut off their confrontation, but I hadn't thought about what to do next.

I flailed my arms awkwardly, glanced around to gauge the situation, then shook my head quickly.

[D-Don't fight…]

The click of the necklace echoed softly.

Was it my imagination?

Lately, whenever I heard that click, it felt like I could almost sense the emotions behind the words.

"……"

"……"

After a pause, Master and Professor Liana exchanged strange looks.

Then, as if coming to a silent understanding, they both took turns hugging me.

[What about training?]

That was all there was to it.

We did some mana tug-of-war with Master, practiced magic and spirit fusion with Professor Liana, but no physical training.

"Do you plan to spar in that body?"

Master raised an eyebrow, pinching my right hand with a bemused expression.

[Yes.]

"Out of consideration for your opponent, you should stop…"

Even Professor Liana, standing beside me, pressed her soft finger against my cheek, looking at me with a peculiar gaze.

[…?]

In the end, I didn't get to do any physical training or sparring, but being held

in their arms and showered with affection helped recharge my energy.

* * *

After finishing my training, I stopped by a study room near the first-year area.

I didn't rent it alone. I met up with Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, and Elia.

The plan was to work together and finalize our schedules.

I was also going to finalize my schedule, having already received advice from Master and Professor Liana earlier.

There's not much time, so I need to wrap it up quickly. I've already thought about what classes to take, so it shouldn't take long.

"Don't try your tricks on my child, you f… Ahem! You fox."

"Tricks? What are you talking about? What have I done to deserve this kind of accusation?"

The earlier scene repeated itself.

Hong Yeon-hwa growled, while Baek Ahrin shrugged her shoulders, feigning innocence.

I awkwardly sucked on my drink, feeling out of place.

* * *

[Unique Ability [Mana Affinity] is growing.]

…

[Your life energy is recovering slightly.]

[Foreign life energy is resisting.]

[Life energy is being expelled.]

[The Curse of Short Lifespan is responding.]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affinity]

Lee Hayul → Liana Velus

●●●●●●●○○○ (75▷76/100)

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Kind Adult] [Soft] [Warmth] [Full]

…

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●●○○ (86▷87/100)

[Master] [Anticipation] [Sense of Stability] [Yearning for Affection]

…

[The artifact [Necklace of Confession] has detected changes in the user.]

.

CHAPTER 172
MUST BE NICE HAVING SO MANY MOMS (2)

As you walk around the Shio-ram campus, you'll see all sorts of buildings.

Some buildings are dedicated to a single subject, while others house multiple facilities crammed together.

Money isn't an issue, so they've built pretty much everything you can think of. Maintenance is handled by magic, so there's no problem.

The study room I'm visiting now… This building is simply full of study rooms.

A modern building with two underground floors and five aboveground. As soon as I stepped through the front door, the cool air embraced me.

Although Shio-ram sits in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the seasons are simulated for the sake of adaptation and other reasons.

Right now, it's set to summer.

Thanks to that, the weather has been pretty hot lately.

It's not at its peak yet, but it's definitely warm enough to feel the heat.

"Ahh… It's so cool~"

Elia, who had entered the building with me, shivered in delight.

The ones who agreed to meet were Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, Elia, and I, but for now, Elia and I decided to secure a study room first.

"Finally, I feel alive. Wow… It's so nice and cool."

Elia stretched her arms upward, enjoying the coolness.

Her chest pushed forward, and her cadet uniform tightened, emphasizing her ample bust.

[Gwasaaaeeeb…]

[Does Elia struggle with the heat?]

“Huh? What was that? Gwasaaaeeeb?”

Elia tilted her head in confusion. I shook my head vigorously, pretending it was nothing.

[It’s nothing.]

[Really.]

[Please don’t tease me…]

I quickly made my way inside, dodging Elia as she kept poking my cheek like she wasn’t convinced. Laughter echoed from behind me.

[Which room should we book?]

“How about the second floor, just for convenience? Not that it matters, since everything we need is in the rooms anyway.”

The large lobby was devoid of people, with only unmanned terminals—kiosks—standing proudly in place.

We operated one of them to book a room and downloaded a virtual key to our smartwatches.

“There aren’t many people here. I thought there’d be more.”

[There are plenty of identical buildings, so everyone’s spread out.]

[Some cadets gather in cafes.]

[And a lot of them just hang out in the parks instead of using facilities like this.]

I explained after interpreting the information I was sensing.

Honestly, the public spaces, like the parks, are so well-equipped that you could sit at a shaded table for hours chatting without any discomfort.

If you need more privacy, you can activate soundproofing magic or find a facility with private rooms.

“Ah… That makes sense, I guess…”

Elia nodded in agreement, but then, her gaze lingered on me with a strange look.

“But… did you figure that out with your sensory ability?”

[Yes.]

[I sensed it with my ability.]

[My range is pretty wide now.]

“Your sensory ability is really amazing.”

Though a bit puzzled by her stare, I nodded at her observation.

“You gather as much information as sight could, your range is massive… and it’s always active… but what about obstacles? Do you ever get blocked or have it bounce back?”

[I adjust the range as needed.]

[It shuts off on its own when I sleep.]

[As for obstacles… I haven't really had to think about it. It just works.]

Sensory abilities are notoriously difficult to control.

There are different types of sensory abilities. Some just enhance vision, but the more advanced types are like mine, where you project a field of perception.

Essentially, it's like detecting a certain area using mana, similar to my method.

Of course, there are big differences from mine.

The information they gather isn't as varied or accurate as mine.

For most people, it's just an extension of mana sensing, helping them detect the presence of mana-rich entities and providing limited interpretations.

Moreover, the values fluctuate based on environmental mana waves, making it a tricky ability to manage.

That's part of why it took the cadets so long to find me in the Tower of Growth.

With all the mana waves and high concentration of mana in the environment, plus me hiding in a crevice, it became incredibly difficult for them to locate me.

I've heard the groans of cadets during sensory-related lectures from time to time.

Since my ability is a power, not a unique ability, I can't fully relate.

'Hmm… '

The Power of Observation. I should start applying it more soon…

At first, I was much better at handling Observation than Space, but now Space has caught up in terms of application.

The Power of Space alone allows for things like subspace creation, space manipulation, space barriers, long-distance spatial leaps… There are so many ways to use it.

But I haven't yet fully explored the applications of the Power of Observation.

The Power of Protection? I'm not even at the stage of applying that; I'm still practicing using the base version.

"Hmmm…"

As I pondered and answered, Elia's gaze grew even more peculiar.

Then her expression shifted, a mischievous and playful look overtaking her face.

A growing sense of unease filled me.

"Your ability to bypass obstacles is pretty impressive. I've heard it's really hard to develop that aspect of sensory abilities."

[Yes…]

"So, can you see through walls or ceilings? Even through security spells?"

[Yes, I can bypass most of them.]

Actually, it's not "most" but "almost all."

There are only a few things I haven't been able to bypass with the Power of Observation.

For instance, the inside of the Towers.

The Tower of Growth that I observed from Shio-ram, and the Tower of Space

that I observed from the Association's headquarters.

Both were impossible to penetrate.

Certain dungeons are also difficult due to the various spatial distortions in play. But it's not entirely impossible. Maybe it's because I also possess the Power of Space.

"Wow… That's amazing!"

Elia clapped her hands together, her eyes wide with genuine admiration. The unease that had been creeping up receded slightly.

It seemed like she was just really curious about my sensory ability.

Just as I was concluding that, her next question caught me off guard.

"Then, have you ever looked through my clothes?"

[Yes.]

[It was hard to control back th-……]

[Wait, what?]

?

A giant question mark appeared above my head.

"Hmph."

Elia's lips curled into a sly smile. The playful and mischievous expression I had seen earlier returned.

'Ah.'

I realized then.

It was a trap.

My face turned pale.

* * *

We walked down a hallway lined with doors on either side.

Since the building was fairly large, the corridors were quite long.

The cleanliness of the floor suggested it wasn't being cleaned by people, probably by automatic cleaners or a cleaning spell.

[Eliaaa…]

The click of the Necklace of Confession echoed. Though emotionless in tone, it was filled with desperation and frustration.

I followed behind Elia, pouting.

"Hmmm~♪"

Elia seemed unbothered. She hummed a little tune with her hands behind her back, looking cheerful on the surface.

She even giggled quietly, her face full of smiles.

But remembering her words from earlier… Was she really that happy, or was it something else?

'Ugh… '

A heavy sense of injustice weighed on me.

Back when I wasn't fully aware of my powers, during the days of spatial awareness…

My spatial awareness was incredibly unstable.

At first, I received spatial information using the framework of the Power of Observation due to glitches, and even after that, it wasn't exactly a cooperative ability.

Sometimes it would shut down on its own, or the range would suddenly expand. I also ended up receiving information I didn't want to.

Of course, part of it was due to my lack of control.

And during that time… I may have absorbed some inappropriate information.

[Noooooooo…]

[No, really, it's not like that.]

[Believe me…]

But I swear to the heavens, I erased those memories without hesitation.

I immediately turned away, buried the information deep down, and tried my hardest not to recall it…

"Hmph."

Elia shrugged her shoulders and stifled a laugh.

Before I knew it, we'd arrived at the room we had rented. Elia pressed her smartwatch against the authentication device.

[Cadet Elia, you have been authenticated.]

[You have rented Room 2-12.]

Whirrr… The door slid open smoothly, and Elia stepped inside.

"Oh, the facilities are really nice. As expected from Shio-ram."

As Elia said, the facilities were excellent.

The air inside was pleasant and cool.

There was a tea set on one side, along with snacks like cookies and candy, and even a refrigerator.

On the other side, large sofas encircled a table, while in the center of the room, a round table with chairs was set up.

Elia flopped down onto one of the sofas, sinking into its softness with a sigh of contentment as she pressed herself into the backrest.

[Eliaaa…]

“Yes, yes, what is it?”

Elia smiled brightly as she turned to look at me.

I hesitated as I floated around nearby, unsure what to say, and she stared at me silently without saying anything.

“Oh dear… Why do you look like that? Hmm? Come here.”

Seeing me at a loss, Elia opened her arms wide with a look that said she couldn’t help it.

The gesture, offering a comforting embrace.

Relieved that she wasn’t about to change her mind, I quickly flew into her arms.

I nestled into her soft embrace.

The Wings of the Sky, which had been hanging limply, fluttered gently.

“Hehehe, oh, so cute.”

Elia's quiet giggle echoed above me as she held me tightly.

"Hayul, did you really see through my clothes?"

[It was an accident, I'm sorry.]

[I erased it immediately.]

[Since gaining control, I haven't looked again…]

[Please believe me…]

"Aww, it's okay, Hayul. You don't need to apologize."

Soon, her arms wrapped around me, pulling me securely into her embrace. My face was buried between her warm, soft skin.

Her gentle hands stroked my head and back in turn.

[This feels nice.]

[Being petted makes me happy…]

[So soft and warm…]

I melted into the comfort.

All my stress and remaining fatigue dissolved without a trace.

Sleepiness crept in once again. I had just gotten plenty of sleep earlier, but it felt like I could drift off again…

In the past, I used to hate sleep.

Even if I felt drowsy, it was hard to actually fall asleep.

The moment I lost consciousness made me anxious, knowing I couldn't respond to any sudden emergencies, so I hated it.

Even when I took medication to finally sleep, I ended up having nightmares ten out of ten times, which made me dread sleeping even more.

But that's not been the case lately.

Specifically, when I sleep near someone I trust, it's no longer like that.

With the warmth and softness of their body, the soothing sound of their heartbeat right next to me…

The anxiety gradually fades away, replaced by a sense of comfort and safety.

I used to only sleep for short periods, every few days at most, but now I'm sleeping soundly every single day.

[I'm sleepy…]

[I shouldn't fall asleep…]

[But I'm so sleepy…]

"Yeon-hwa and Ahrin said they'll take a bit longer, so you can nap for a little while. I'll wake you up when they arrive."

[I just slept…]

[I shouldn't sleep again…]

"It's fine. Babies are supposed to sleep a lot. Since you're in a child's body now, it's normal to feel sleepier."

Elia's reassuring whisper in my ear loosened the grip I had on my fading consciousness.

Now that I think about it, a short nap should be okay…

The part of my consciousness I've sectioned off is still analyzing magic books and studying… Another part is monitoring Seo-yul's condition… Yeon-hwa

and Ahrin… they're still not here… they're busy with something… Just like Elia said, it'll take some time…

It should be fine if my main consciousness rests…

My mind began to sink into slumber.

"Oh, right. Can I ask you one more thing?"

Elia's voice slipped into my fading awareness.

[Yes…]

[What is it…?]

"When you sensed my body, what did you think?"

My thoughts…? When was that?

Back when my spatial sense came back online… was it then?

I fumbled through foggy memories.

I found it.

It was a memory I had buried deep down.

Not as far down as my early childhood memories but still pretty deep.

What was it like? I opened the memory.

The Necklace of Confession clicked.

[Your chest was really big…]

"Pfft…"

With that last thought, my consciousness fully submerged into sleep.

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CHAPTER 173
MUST BE NICE HAVING SO MANY MOMS (3)

My consciousness rose slowly from the depths.

It wasn't quick.

This wasn't an emergency call from one of my split consciousnesses.

The magic books were still updating and studying, and the automated danger detection system that I had set up was working fine, too.

'I'm still a bit inexperienced and dizzy with it, but I'll get used to it eventually.'

The division of consciousness. I attempted it last time using knowledge from the original source, and it turned out better than expected.

There are still many rough edges, but even so, I'm proud of the fact that I managed to pull it off.

Originally, I wanted to imitate the [Consciousness Division] unique ability using Homogenization… but unfortunately, I couldn't find anyone who had it.

There are plenty of other unique abilities I'd like to track down as well.

But I haven't found many yet.

After all, the only places I've explored so far are parts of Scotland, some areas in China, and a brief stopover in Seoul while using the gate…

'Unique ability users are rare. I have to keep that in mind… '

Only a tiny fraction of the population awakens as superhumans. Of those

superhumans, only a small portion manifest unique abilities.

Most of these unique abilities are basic physical enhancements.

Things like swordsmanship, spear techniques, and other foundational skills.

Then there are elemental abilities like fire, water, wind, earth, and electricity.

Of course, those can evolve, but it's still extremely difficult.

As a result, rare and distinctive unique ability users are few and far between.

'Most of the unique abilities I've used via Homogenization were found at Shio-ram.'

There are so many unique ability users at Shio-ram that it's almost overwhelming.

Even if I extend my observation field in all directions, most cadets—nearly all of them, really—possess a unique ability. There are even a few who have manifested two unique abilities.

But it's different outside.

Take the people I met while searching through China, for instance.

Most were ordinary civilians who hadn't even awakened, and of the superhumans and necromancers I fought, few had unique abilities.

My consciousness fully surfaced, and my senses reconnected.

My cheek felt warm and soft.

I activated my observation.

Elia came into view.

She was sitting on a sofa, and I was lying with my head resting on her lap.

A yellow blanket was pulled up to my chin, and I was sound asleep, looking quite content.

“Sweetie? Everyone will be arriving soon. It’s time to wake up~”

Her gentle voice tickled my ears. Her slender fingers softly kneaded my cheek. It seemed she had been trying to wake me up like this for a while.

“Haha. It tickles, Hayul.”

-Yawn…

As I rubbed my cheek against her, she chuckled, and her warm palm stroked my face.

I let out a big yawn.

I wriggled a bit, trying to shake off the drowsiness that clung to me.

More laughter came from above my head.

“Hayul, you look like a little caterpillar.”

[Nooo…]

[I’m not a bug.]

“That’s not what I meant. I meant you’re cute.”

[I don’t like bugs…]

“Oh? You don’t like bugs, Hayul?”

Elia stopped poking my cheek playfully and looked at me with wide eyes.

“Back in the dungeon raid, you didn’t seem to mind them at all.”

The dungeon raid?

Oh… Was she talking about that time at the start of the semester? That raid was in a forest, so naturally, there were a lot of bugs.

[I couldn't run away even though I hated them…]

[I don't like bugs…]

[They taste awful…]

[I hate cockroaches…]

"Ah… Uh-huh. I shouldn't have brought it up. I'm sorry."

[It's okay…]

I leaned back against the sofa, sitting upright as a bit of time passed.

My drowsiness gradually faded, and soon I was alert and wide awake.

At that moment, a notification came from the door.

[Cadet Baek Ahrin, authenticated.]

[Cadet Hong Yeon-hwa, authenticated.]

The door slid open smoothly, and a familiar scent wafted in.

The Wings of the Sky fluttered gently.

Soon, Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin entered.

I blinked my eyes open, and the sight of Hong Yeon-hwa, looking a bit displeased with her brows furrowed, filled my vision.

Our eyes met.

She focused and opened her mouth.

“Yeon-hwa.”

No stammering this time.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes sparkled as she quickly approached and scooped me into her arms.

“Hayul! Nothing happened, right? Did you do everything you needed to this morning?”

“Yes. Don’t worry.”

My face was buried in her chest, which smelled sweet and warm. I rubbed my face against her soft skin, feeling content.

[Scent.]

[Happiness.]

[Sweetness.]

“Uh, um… Well, as long as everything’s okay.”

“And what am I, invisible?”

Baek Ahrin, who had been standing behind, grumbled as she stepped forward.

Her blue eyes stared directly at mine. I turned my gaze toward hers, but all I could see was a thick gray mist.

“Seriously? You can’t even talk to me? What is this, some sort of spell?”

Baek Ahrin tilted her head curiously as she confirmed where my focus lay.

[…]

‘…It’s a curse… ’ I thought silently, knowing full well that speaking it aloud

could land me with another near-death experience like last time.

I quickly adjusted the Necklace of Confession, making sure it wouldn't act up on its own again.

"…Well, everyone has a secret or two they can't share with others, right?"

Baek Ahrin shrugged before turning her attention to me, seeking confirmation.

[Yes…]

I nodded reluctantly.

* * *

We gathered around the round table in the center of the room.

I had no choice but to sit next to Hong Yeon-hwa.

Elia took the seat beside me, while Baek Ahrin sat across from us.

"So, am I an outcast now? I'm going to report this to Shio-ram, just so you know."

"Don't be ridiculous."

[Why were you and Baek Ahrin late, Hong Yeon-hwa?]

I had a rough idea from my observations, but I hadn't measured it precisely.

Hong Yeon-hwa responded first to my question.

"I came from the [Comprehensive Combat Theory] and [Advanced Practical Swordsmanship] classes. We only went over the introductions today, but they seem like they'll be worth attending."

Comprehensive Combat Theory and Advanced Practical Swordsmanship…

Those were definitely classes a combat-focused student like Hong Yeon-hwa would take.

Especially Comprehensive Combat Theory, which was a popular class in the original story.

For weapon proficiency, you had to take subjects like swordsmanship or spear techniques, but for overall combat proficiency, Comprehensive Combat Theory was the most efficient.

I remember the professor in charge was someone who made a name for themselves on the frontlines of the Demonic Realm. They had received the highest-level evaluation but retired due to injuries around that time.

If I recall correctly, they're regarded as an honorary top-tier hero for their accomplishments.

In my second playthrough, I relied heavily on Comprehensive Combat Theory.

Back then, I had started with the unique ability [Combat Aptitude].

As the name suggests, it was a unique ability that provided all-around buffs for combat skills, so I squeezed every bit of value out of that class.

"I came from [Advanced Magical Mechanics]. Ugh… It's so complicated that my head hurts."

Baek Ahrin responded while shaking her head, clearly exasperated.

Though she also majored in combat, Baek Ahrin was so versatile that she was taking a variety of subjects.

Advanced Magical Mechanics.

It's a subject where you break down, analyze, interpret, and reconstruct magical formulas from top to bottom.

It’s so difficult that going in unprepared means you’ll barely improve at all while wasting your time.

[Did you only attend introductory lectures too, Elia?]

“Yes, I only attended [Healing Arts (II)].”

Elia, being a support major, had taken a class related to her healing-oriented unique ability.

‘Hmm… ’

It seems they’ve already planned their schedules in advance.

Well, the available courses were announced ahead of time, so they could have planned everything long before the first semester… or even over the break.

…I also intended to organize my schedule while spending time with Seo-yul over the break, but things didn’t exactly go as planned.

I never would have imagined I’d end up like this after losing a fight against a Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

“Hayul, you need to finalize yours by the end of the week. Do you have anything in mind?”

“Yeah, as a special entrant, you can take a ton of courses, right? You can change your schedule later, but it’s best to be careful with your initial choices.”

[Yes.]

[I have a few ideas.]

As I answered Elia’s question, all eyes turned toward me.

“What do you have in mind? Have you already decided?”

Hong Yeon-hwa asked with sparkling eyes.

[Yes.]

[I’m planning on focusing on magic.]

Once I enter the Tower of Knowledge, I’ll be able to study magic extensively.

But in the end, I need a solid foundation to do so. I plan to improve my magic skills as much as possible until then.

“Magic…?”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s excited expression faltered.

“Magic is great.”

Unlike her, Baek Ahrin clapped her hands, her face lighting up.

“Do you have any specific courses in mind?”

[I’m planning to follow Professor Liana’s advice.]

[I’m thinking of taking courses like Circuit Construction (II) and Deployment & Reverse Deployment (II).]

“Circuit Construction is a must. It’s fundamental in all magic. Deployment and Reverse Deployment are also crucial. As for other recommendations…”

[Thanks for the suggestions.]

[I’ll focus on completing the basics first…]

For now, I plan to take mostly magic-related courses.

I’ll also take a few supplementary courses, like crafting…

“Are you going to take [Monster Taming and Handling] too, Hayul?”

Elia tilted her head curiously as she scanned the list of my chosen courses.

[Yes.]

[I’m interested in it, so I’m just going to take one class as a sample.]

Monster Taming.

It’s not a course that takes up much time. It’s more like a general education course that only requires an hour or two a week.

You get to see various monsters in person and learn about taming, or rather, controlling them.

It’s not exactly a popular course, but I thought it might help with necromancy… and it could come in handy in the future, so I decided to give it a try.

There weren’t any major assignments, so it wouldn’t be too burdensome.

‘Do they show unicorns in this class?’

Unicorns.

They’re high-tier monsters, around the 4th rank in the standard hierarchy. Shio-ram only has a few of them, as they are rare creatures.

After destroying a Bicorn’s horn in the past, I’ve often wondered what unicorns would be like.

Would they hate me too? To be honest, I wasn’t too confident they’d like me…

“Then I’ll take that course, too.”

“I guess I’ll give it a try as well~”

[What?]

[Are you sure?]

Elia and Baek Ahrin quickly modified their schedules in real time. I blinked in surprise and asked again.

[Won't it mess up your schedules?]

"It's fine. We have plenty of free time."

"I-I'll try it too."

Hong Yeon-hwa hurriedly adjusted her schedule as well.

"Yeon-hwa, you? You're not taming monsters; you're more likely to massacre them… Ow!"

"Quiet."

We spent a while organizing our course selections.

I had already received advice from Professor Liana.

When we discussed and organized our courses with each other, it made the process much easier.

Baek Ahrin's recommendations also matched many of the courses I had been considering.

I also received some advice I hadn't thought of, which allowed me to make real-time adjustments.

[…Keep in mind…]

-Poke…

[Hmm?]

I felt a poke on my cheek.

The culprit was Hong Yeon-hwa.

She was pressing her finger against my cheek, pouting slightly.

“Yeon-hwa?”

Curious, I tilted my head. Hong Yeon-hwa hesitated a bit before speaking.

“…Maybe I should try learning magic too.”

“Do you think that’s possible?”

Baek Ahrin tilted her head in confusion from across the table.

“You opened an introductory magic book once and tore it to shreds in two hours…”

“Shut up! Be quiet!”

Hong Yeon-hwa shouted. The sudden loud noise startled me.

“A-Ah! I’m sorry, Hayul…”

[It’s okay…]

My ears hurt…

* * *

“Phew… It’s finally over.”

Elia, who was sitting next to me, massaged her shoulders as she spoke.

As she said, we were mostly done with our schedules. There was some final reviewing to do, but that wouldn’t take long.

“Shall we grab some snacks? There are plenty over there.”

“Oh, I checked it out earlier. There are lots of cookies and a variety of drinks in the fridge.”

“What should I get you, Hayul?”

[Oh, I’ll just…]

[Just a drink, please.]

“Got it~”

Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia headed toward the snacks that were provided.

“Oh, right, Hayul. Want to try this?”

[What is it?]

At that moment, Baek Ahrin, who had been quietly sitting, clapped her hands like she had just remembered something. She reached into her subspace pouch hanging from her waist.

Soon, a black plastic bag appeared in her pale white hands.

The bag was fairly large.

It also looked strangely familiar.

As if confirming my thoughts, Baek Ahrin pulled the contents out of the bag.

Soon, the items were spread out on the table.

Long, white, and glossy on the outside…

“What is that? A rice cake?”

It was indeed a rice cake. Thanks to the subspace pouch, it hadn’t hardened

and was still soft and chewy.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been approaching with a handful of snacks, tilted her head curiously.

Baek Ahrin waggled her finger in response.

“There’s more than just that. Look closely.”

As Baek Ahrin said, it wasn’t just rice cakes on the table—there were all sorts of other traditional Korean rice cakes laid out neatly.

“Oh! I’ve had this before. Isn’t this Songpyeon?”

Elia, who was holding a drink, pointed to some round rice cakes in various colors—white, pink, yellow, and more.

“Yes, you’re right. But when did you try Songpyeon? It’s not that well-known in the UK.”

Baek Ahrin tilted her head, curious.

Despite the upheaval after the Great Cataclysm, which had mixed cultures together, certain regional culinary traditions still remained intact.

Elia’s home was in the UK… Scotland, to be specific. It didn’t seem like a place where Songpyeon would be common.

“Before I enrolled in Shio-ram, I tried it once.”

Elia explained calmly.

“I ended up in Seoul after a gate mishap. I had some time to kill before the next gate opened, so I wandered around and tried Songpyeon.”

[Seoul? Right before enrolling?]

[When we met?]

“Yes, that’s right. That’s when I first tried it. There were lots of food stalls in the area.”

‘Oh…?’

I nodded at Elia’s explanation.

Now that I think about it, Elia’s hometown is in the UK, but we first met in Seoul.

Since there’s a gate terminal in the UK, she could have gone straight to Shioram from there without going through Seoul.

Baek Ahrin tilted her head, still puzzled by Elia’s explanation.

“A mistake…? How do you accidentally go through the wrong gate?”

“It was an issue with the management. You know how back in March there were a lot of gate transfer errors?”

“Oh… That? Yeah, that was a big deal. There hadn’t been any incidents for so long, and then a bunch of accidents happened in a row.”

“I didn’t really mind. I had plenty of time, and I received enough compensation, so I wasn’t upset. Plus…”

Elia reached out and tidied my hair with her long, white fingers.

“If it weren’t for that mistake, I wouldn’t have met Hayul. So for me, it wasn’t an accident—it was good fortune.”

Elia smiled brightly. Her expression was so genuine, so full of relief, that I couldn’t help but smile back.

[Meeting Elia was good fortune for me too.]

I meant it sincerely.

Meeting Elia that day was truly a stroke of luck.

In hindsight, it felt like fate, maybe?

At the time, I was so withdrawn that I would run away from any external help in sheer panic.

And in such a state, I happened to meet Elia, who had Spirit Affinity and offered me help.

Her unfamiliar but kind assistance was what allowed my crushing sense of defeat to begin to lift.

“Ahem… Why did you bring all those rice cakes out?”

“Hm? Hayul likes rice cakes.”

“What?”

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked.

“You didn’t know that?”

Baek Ahrin chuckled softly and grabbed a piece of rice cake.

“Here, have a bite.”

Baek Ahrin held out the rice cake toward me.

It was the same kind of rice cake I had eaten last time.

I opened my mouth wide and bit into the end of the rice cake. It tore off easily, and I chewed the chewy piece of rice cake.

“……”

“……?”

I turned my head, sensing the silence beside me, and saw Hong Yeon-hwa looking shocked.

* * *

[But is it okay for you and Baek Ahrin to plan everything like this, Yeon-hwa?]

“Huh? Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Nothing wrong with it, is there?”

[Um…]

Both of them tilted their heads in confusion at my question. Their puzzled expressions made me feel a bit awkward.

[Don’t you need to coordinate with your friends?]

“Friends? Oh…”

At my response, Hong Yeon-hwa let out a small sound of realization.

I was referring, of course, to her friends, like Shin Seo-yul, who often mixed up their names with Seo-yul’s… and a few other friends.

They were people from notable families, ones who had been close with both Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin since childhood.

In the original story… or at least in the beginning of the first semester, I remember they used to hang out together.

But they haven’t been doing that much lately.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin glanced at each other after my question.

A bit of time passed before they both spoke simultaneously.

"…Not really?"

"It's fine."

[…Really?]

I tilted my head, puzzled, but since they didn't seem bothered, I didn't press further.

I nodded vaguely and continued reviewing my course selections.

* * *

[Group Chat: Hong-Baek Team (6)]

▸Shin Seo-yul: Hey

▸Shin Seo-yul: Where's Hong?

▸Shin Seo-yul: I just saw her in the front row a second ago

▸Yang Yoon-ha: She probably bolted off to meet Lee Hayul

▸Shin Seo-yul: That's ridiculous

▸Shin Seo-yul: She didn't even share her course list

▸Yang Yoon-ha: Hasn't it happened enough times this year?

▸Shin Seo-yul: You genius

…

▸Shin Seo-yul: But where's Baek?

▸Shin Seo-yul: And she didn't share her course list either

▸Lee Si-eun: I saw her

▸Shin Seo-yul: Where?

▸Lee Si-eun: She flew off with Hong

▸Shin Seo-yul: Did we get ditched by Baek too?

▸Yang Yoon-ha: This is literally a Hong-Baek team without Hong or Baek

[Group Chat: Hong-Baek-less Team (4)]

▸Shin Seo-yul: Baek's gone crazy too

▸Shin Seo-yul: First the tournament, now this

▸Shin Seo-yul: Is she messing with Hong's bid right in front of us?

▸Shin Seo-yul: Damn, are we about to have a war?

▸Lee Si-eun: A war? That's a bit much

▸Lee Si-eun: Just say the Three Great Clans will start fighting amongst themselves

▸Yang Yoon-ha: Do you really think a war will start over one guy, Seo-yul?

▸Shin Seo-yul: Have you seen real life? It's worse than that

▸Shin Seo-yul: Ever heard of someone causing kingdoms to fall?

▸Shin Seo-yul: With the way Lee Hayul acts now, I wouldn't be surprised if someone wanted to start a war to have him

▸Lee Si-eun: More like you'll be the first one to get your head chopped off if you leak these messages

▸Shin Seo-yul: If I die, you're going down with me, bastard

…

* * *

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CHAPTER 174
GUARANTEED BY A UNICORN… (1)

“S-So you liked rice cakes…”

On the way back to the dormitory after leaving the study room.

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered absentmindedly as she walked along the path dyed in sunset colors.

The scene she had just witnessed in the study room…

Baek Ahrin casually offering rice cakes to Lee Hayul, and Lee Hayul accepting and eating them as if it was familiar…

The shock from that unexpected sight still lingered.

[?]

Lee Hayul tilted his head upon hearing Hong Yeon-hwa’s muttering.

Recently… after eating the rice cakes Baek Ahrin had offered after the tournament, he occasionally ate them because he liked the texture.

Before that, he had no interest in finding anything edible, but chewing and sucking on something chewy in his mouth seemed to calm his mind and body.

He tried chewing gum too… but that wasn’t great since he couldn’t swallow it. So he just bought rice cakes to eat very occasionally?

Lee Hayul, who had been floating along, gently stuck close to Hong Yeon-hwa’s side. He then leaned in and brought his lips close to her ear.

A sweet honey scent suddenly approached. Then a thrilling breath clung to her ear.

“Recently… I’ve been eating a little bit…”

“Ah, ugh… I see…”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s body trembled at the careful voice that softly filled her ear.

A moment later, Lee Hayul pulled away. His scent and breath also receded. Hong Yeon-hwa felt a twinge of regret as she slightly turned her head.

Lee Hayul was still floating in the air.

The green wind supporting his body was visible to Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes.

It was a form that was hazily perceived more through mana sensing than normal eyesight.

It was flight through spirit arts, not magic. Though Hong Yeon-hwa had no talent for either magic or spirit arts, she could tell what technique it was.

“Sigh…”

She wanted to hold him in her arms and carry him, but she couldn’t forcibly embrace Lee Hayul who said he would do this outside for flight practice.

…Of course, given Lee Hayul’s personality, he would likely submit obediently even if she forcibly embraced him, but such coercive behavior shouldn’t be done.

“Ah… since Ahrin gave them to you…?”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s expression soured after hearing the circumstances.

She looked at the floating Lee Hayul with a complicated expression, then turned to look at Baek Ahrin.

“Hm?”

Baek Ahrin tilted her head and pointed at herself with her finger.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s face crumpled at the detestable sight of Baek Ahrin pretending to be innocent as if she knew nothing.

Baek Ahrin blinked.

“What’s with that expression? If you suddenly stare at me like that, someone with a weak heart like me will get hurt, you know?”

“Tsk…”

Hong Yeon-hwa openly clicked her tongue. Even her tone of voice was deliberately annoying.

Baek Ahrin widened her eyes in apparent shock and covered her mouth with both hands.

“W-What? Someone who couldn’t even figure out Hayul’s food preferences is clicking their tongue at me… Eek! Put your fist down. Hayul is right next to you, you know?”

“Damn…”

The fist that was about to slice through the air stopped abruptly. Hong Yeon-hwa’s fist trembled, unable to contain her anger.

Hong Yeon-hwa recalled the character for “endurance” in her mind repeatedly as she gently lowered her fist.

Then, just in case, she glanced towards Lee Hayul to check his reaction.

“Um…”

…Lee Hayul was already playing around with Elia.

Hong Yeon-hwa's already troubled heart was sent into a whirlpool at the sight of Lee Hayul floating comfortably around Elia with a rather relaxed expression.

"Elia Slade."

A fellow cadet from the same Ipchun class who she met and became close with at the start of the semester.

They got along quite well personality-wise, so they became quite close early in the semester.

She has a bright personality and great social skills, so she's well-connected.

She's also talented. Her unique ability is in the rare recovery category, capable of both regeneration and healing.

It was later revealed she also possessed outstanding spirit affinity, so she's a promising talent with a bright future.

That was just her impression before.

"…They're too close."

But at some point, she had suddenly gotten close to Lee Hayul.

She knew Lee Hayul had received some small help from her in the past and formed a small connection, but now it was clearly not just some small connection anymore…

By the time she noticed, Elia had already built up a lot of goodwill with Lee Seo-yul, whom Lee Hayul loved and cherished like his own child.

She even settled into the dormitory, acting just like a mother.

On top of that, Lee Seo-yul was accepting Elia's care without resistance despite pretending to be grumpy, and Lee Hayul was also being cared for

together…

The saying that the quiet cat is the first to climb onto the stove… it's not wrong at all.

"I-I haven't even gotten to hold Seo-yul once yet…!"

Lee Seo-yul, who for some reason only showed wariness towards her and growled like a guarded puppy.

Lee Hayul, who claimed to just be a caretaker fairy but clearly loved and cherished Lee Seo-yul like his own child…

Thanks to that, it had become a complicated situation where she might end up being disliked by both Lee Hayul and Lee Seo-yul if she interfered unnecessarily.

Hong Yeon-hwa wasn't very good with social skills, to put it nicely. She was clumsy with human relationships, and since this was her first time dating, she didn't know how to respond.

She was getting advice from her mother Choi Jiyeon, but it felt wrong to discuss every little detail.

"Tsk…"

Above all, that thing that caught her eye.

Hong Yeon-hwa lowered her gaze slightly to examine the area around Elia's chest.

The plump flesh of her ample bosom.

The large mounds of flesh that were clearly visible as her shirt looked ready to burst.

Hong Yeon-hwa's pupils clouded over.

She must have bewitched Lee Hayul, who was starved for motherly love, with those ridiculously large cow-like udders…

“Mine aren’t small either…”

Hong Yeon-hwa glanced down at her own.

She saw her own breasts, which were also amply swollen.

Large, curved mounds of flesh. Useless lumps of fat that got in the way when moving and that she wished would disappear.

But lately, she was glad to have these lumps of flesh…

She estimated the sizes of her own and Elia’s. Hong Yeon-hwa’s head spun round and round. Soon the results came in.

Elia > Hong Yeon-hwa

“Damn it.”

Suddenly a curse word came out. It was a foolish thought. Comparing on her own, getting upset on her own… what was she doing?

Feeling a sudden realization, Hong Yeon-hwa crumpled her face and turned her gaze away.

“Why is your expression so crumpled? Do you have something troubling you? If so, I’m available for counseling anytime! 24-hour worry counseling center open! Contact by text please!”

“……”

As she was lost in such worries, Baek Ahrin, who had noticed Hong Yeon-hwa’s strange mood, quietly approached.

Hong Yeon-hwa was dumbfounded by Baek Ahrin’s playful chatter, when

suddenly her eyes fell on the outline of Baek Ahrin's chest.

The ongoing calculation produced a result.

Elia ≥ Baek Ahrin > Hong Yeon-hwa

It was similar in size to Elia's.

Meaning they were plump like a cow's udders.

"……"

Baek Ahrin on the left and Elia on the right.

Add in the shameless, terrible professor who now cherishes her after beating her like a dog, and Professor Liana whose gaze towards Lee Hayul has been strange lately…

She was surrounded on all sides by very complicated things that might make Lee Hayul dislike her if she tried to deal with them all…

"Sigh…"

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a deep sigh and firmly pinched Lee Hayul's cheek, stretching it out. She played with the warm, soft cheek flesh as she pleased.

"Bweh…"

Lee Hayul made a strange sound as he obediently offered his cheek.

* * *

The lectures have been roughly sorted out.

I decided on magic as my main subject.

Occasionally, once or twice a week, I signed up for miscellaneous subjects like crafting or monster taming.

I hardly took any combat subjects.

Because I have Master's teachings.

By the way, Master also evaluates me and gives me grades. When I checked my first semester report card, almost everything was a perfect score.

When I carefully asked if it was special treatment, she drew a clear line saying it was an impartial evaluation. I'm not sure of her true intentions, but if that's what she says, it's fortunate.

Today also started with an early morning.

"I'm sleepy…"

I opened my mouth wide and let out a yawn. No matter how much I slept, I just couldn't shake off the drowsiness.

It wasn't this bad before…

"The consciousness division is… going well. Very good."

The term "division" may be incorrect. It's just a matter of setting boundaries in consciousness and assigning each part its own task.

It could be considered essentially multitasking.

One consciousness is conducting precise 24-hour omnidirectional observation for any potential dangers.

Of course, if I were to take in all the information, I'd go crazy, so I only observe information that is estimated to be a threat.

Of course, there won't be any such threats in Shio-ram, but… knowing it's a safe place, I'm practicing with peace of mind.

The second consciousness is busy accumulating and interpreting knowledge

while observing magic books stocked in the dormitory and far away in the library.

Feeling the limits of studying while fighting sleep, I was using divided consciousness to observe and study simultaneously.

Several other miscellaneous divided consciousnesses were also operating.

As a result, it was consuming a tremendous amount of resources… mental energy.

In fact, the reason I've been feeling sleepy no matter how much I sleep lately might be because of this…

Headaches also accompanied it.

It was pain comparable to… no, even worse than the beginning of the semester when I was crushed by pressure and stress.

But I've grown too, so I could endure it well enough.

Also, it was fine lately because stress was relieved very well due to always being held in someone's arms.

I wriggled my body and pulled my face out from where it was buried in her chest.

My head pulled back, and the flesh scent that had filled my nostrils faded.

As I felt regret at that, Hong Yeon-hwa's sleeping brow furrowed slightly.

Soon her arms flailed about, trying to grab me.

I blinked and saw the deeply carved valley of flesh.

It's where the flesh scent is strongest. Even now, a sweet flesh scent is wafting up from there.

If I entrusted my body to those arms, I could bury myself in warm, soft breasts, smell the milk scent, and fall into a happy sleep, but… unfortunately I had a lot of schedules.

With a feeling of swallowing tears of regret, I pulled my body away.

There were others behind me as well.

Seo-yul clinging tightly to my back, and Elia sleeping while holding Seo-yul in her arms.

In order, it was Hong Yeon-hwa, me, Seo-yul, and Elia. It was an arrangement reached through a kind of agreement.

Thanks to the large bed, there was plenty of space too.

I sat on the edge of the bed and tapped my smartwatch. Soon a hologram was projected, displaying my schedule.

[Today's Alarm]

[▸AM 10:00 – "Monster Taming and Response" Overview Briefing]

[Current Time: AM 07:30]

Today is the day for the monster taming lecture.

I got down from the bed…

"Daddy, where are you going…"

[Gak]

My hair was grabbed by a hand stretched out from behind.

The culprit was Seo-yul. With a drowsy face, unable to even open her eyes, Seo-yul whined and pulled on my hair.

[Ow, it hurts]

[Seo-yul…]

[You shouldn't pull other people's hair…]

She was incredibly strong. I don't know where this strength came from, but I was forcibly thrown back onto the bed by her rough grip.

The strength itself was no match for mine, but I couldn't resist Seo-yul out of conscience…

Soon Seo-yul wriggled out of Elia's arms and climbed on top of me, squashing me like a pillow.

"Let's sleep together… don't go…"

Her arms and legs tied me up like ropes.

[Gyaak…]

In that moment, I received a huge shock.

I was held in Seo-yul's arms.

It wasn't me holding her, but being held in her arms.

Seo-yul hugged me…

"Oh my goodness…"

Something in my heart shattered at the sight of Seo-yul, who had undeniably grown bigger than me…

One spoonful of emotion that children grow up very quickly.

One bucket of despair that I had already been caught up to…

I need to restore my body as soon as possible.

My will blazed up once again…

[Aak…]

[You shouldn't bite…]

* * *

[Player Correction System: Likability]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

●●●●●●●●○○(80▸81/100)

[Likability] [Gratitude] [Chick] [Apologetic] [Guilt]

…

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●○○○○(68▸69/100)

[Likability] [Question] [Confusion]

CHAPTER 175
GUARANTEED BY A UNICORN… (2)

It took some time before I could finally get out of bed.

Thanks to setting the alarm with extra time, there was no problem. I had factored in these little delays from the start.

The reason I was shocked wasn't because of that.

'I've… I've been caught up to… '

The observed data was too accurate to ignore… but I had been trying hard to disregard it.

But when Seo-yul directly squashed me with her body, there was no way to deny it anymore.

I never imagined Seo-yul would grow bigger than me.

My head rang as if struck by a blunt object. It was a reality too unbelievable to accept.

There's the excuse that my body is in an abnormal state, but… the shock just wouldn't fade.

I also never expected to have my hair grabbed and be roughly dragged around by a child who sees me as a parent.

I really didn't expect to experience similar treatment from a child after enduring it from those who were supposed to be parents…

Of course, Seo-yul's case is completely different.

She did it unconsciously while drowsy, so I wasn't hurt or offended.

[Seo-yul]

[You shouldn't grab other people's hair like that]

Instead, I gently cautioned her not to do it again next time.

I wasn't harsh about it.

Worried that she might feel scared of such incidents and have the fear deeply ingrained in her memory, I softly whispered right next to her… admonishing her in a gentle manner.

I had concerns too. Wondering if I was being too lenient and just letting it slide…

Of course, Seo-yul is truly a good child, but just in case.

"I'm sorry… I won't do it again…"

My worries were completely unfounded.

Realizing her mistake, Seo-yul apologized with a gloomy expression.

She looked so dejected that even her wings drooped lifelessly.

My heart swelled with emotion at the sight of Seo-yul looking apologetic with tears in her eyes.

'Seo-yul is so good… '

I had faith, but was worried she might throw a tantrum.

I've been consistently reading parenting books, but had no confidence in disciplining a young child.

To begin with, I wondered if it was right to educate a fairy child by human

standards.

But as if to erase my concerns, she immediately acknowledged her mistake and apologized with such proper behavior!

Her articulate speech was surprising, but the way she immediately realized her mistake and apologized…!

My shoulders trembled with overwhelming emotion.

[It's okay since Seo-yul didn't do it on purpose]

[What's important is not repeating mistakes]

[You apologized right away, you're so good]

Unable to contain my emotions, I hugged Seo-yul tightly.

Proper comfort should follow after stern discipline.

I'm not sure if it was stern, but since Seo-yul immediately realized her mistake and apologized, I'm giving her a reward.

With that thought, I hugged Seo-yul—

– Squeeze…

The warm temperature unique to babies was clearly transmitted.

As if she was never gloomy, Seo-yul smiled like a sunflower and pressed her body close.

…So, I hugged, hugged her…

"Mmm… thank you. I love you, Daddy…"

Arms wrapped around my back, and Seo-yul's soft, warm cheek rubbed against mine.

The direction was from above to below.

‘……’

…I was… the one being hugged…

I felt utterly miserable. My body went limp. Unaware of my feelings, Seo-yul just kept smiling brightly and rubbing her cheek.

Seo-yul’s wings, which had been drooping, now glowed brightly and fluttered, tangling with the Wings of the Sky floating behind me.

The Wings of the Sky drooped lifelessly…

I quickly finished breakfast and left the dormitory.

“My lady, I shall devote myself to serving you, so please go with ease.”

As I was putting on my shoes at the entrance, Ariel came out to see me off.

Wearing a modernized and simplified maid uniform, Ariel, with her characteristic expressionless face, patted her chest and declared.

Ariel Trydon.

She is Hong Yeon-hwa’s bodyguard and attendant, but now she’s taking care of Lee Seo-yul under Hong Yeon-hwa’s orders when I’m away for studies.

[I’m sorry for the trouble]

[Please take good care of her]

“Yes, leave it to me, young master.”

Though she appears to be full of peculiar elements, she was once renowned as a top-tier hunter, so there’s no need to worry about safety.

Of course, if I sense any sign of trouble with Seo-yul, I’ll immediately space

jump there.

[Seo-yul]

“Yes…”

Next to Ariel stood Seo-yul, firmly on her two feet.

Now fluent in speech and able to run around, Seo-yul answered with her lips pursed.

Even a quick glance showed she was in a sulky mood.

“I’m lonely… come back soon.”

‘Ugh… ’

Words that struck my conscience spilled from those pursed lips. I felt like I was about to crumble…

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Most regular lectures are held in the center of Shio-ram, but this lecture is taking place on the outskirts.

The outskirts of Shio-ram mostly consist of empty spaces, dungeons, and monster breeding grounds.

The “Monster Taming and Response” lecture requires monsters, so we headed to the outskirts.

Although it’s an outer area away from the center, even buses operate here.

Thanks to that, I just comfortably arrived on an autonomous bus.

The bus stopped and passengers poured out. I got off along with the crowd.

‘There are many students from other classes too.’

Observing the gazes sticking to me from all directions, I noticed students evenly mixed from various classes.

I nodded as I observed the faces of students from classes other than Ipchun.

While Ipchun class students might be somewhat used to my appearance, it must be quite an unusual sight for students from other classes.

Thanks to that… I can understand those peculiar gazes.

From the second semester, there will be many more points of contact like this without class distinctions.

That wasn’t the only unusual thing.

‘There are students from other grades too.’

The decorations on first-year student uniforms are generally green. The most representative is the necktie.

But I occasionally observed red neckties. Those belong to second-year students in the summer series.

It’s very rare to encounter non-first year students like second years.

At most, there are many who have seen me while wandering around the grounds, but there are also those seeing me for the first time.

Monster Taming and Response is a subject that students from other grades can take too.

Some subjects are restricted by grade, but there are also subjects without restrictions.

‘If I’m lucky, I might run into Senior Lee Ji-yeon.’

Of course, that would require luck. It’s easier to assume we won’t meet.

– Is that person really the special admission student…?

– They’re completely different from the image! Just a total baby…

– Did they come to learn monster taming?

– They might have come to learn response methods

– They really do walk around with their eyes closed… Can they sense all this?

The whispering voices were clearly audible. My ears were very itchy.

As I was about to raise my hand to rub my ears, a white hand lightly tapped them.

“You’re super popular. Look at everyone whispering around.”

It was Baek Ahrin who had joined midway and arrived.

Baek Ahrin giggled and gently scratched my ears.

[Don’t tease meeee…]

My body shuddered at the cool touch that accurately scratched the itchy spot I was about to rub.

“What are you doing? Don’t do weird things to Hayul!”

“It’s not weird, I’m just scratching an itchy spot…”

“Move aside! I’ll do it!”

“Ow, such needless jealousy is really… Ack! I’m against violence!”

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We entered the building and found the announced lecture hall.

A lecture hall on the 5th floor. The structure wasn't much different from the lecture halls I usually go to.

Some students had already arrived. After briefly surveying the seats, I sat down in an empty spot where our group could all sit together.

…The height didn't match, so I used the Wings of the Sky as a cushion to sit on.

It was soft and fluffy, perfect for sitting on.

As I did so, Hong Yeon-hwa quickly approached and sat on my left, while Elia sat on my right.

Baek Ahrin blinked blankly. She rolled her eyes for a moment, then poked Hong Yeon-hwa's shoulder.

"…Miss Yeon-hwa, I want to sit next to Hayul this time too."

"Don't be ridiculous. Don't covet and just sit next to me."

"Is this real discrimination? Elia… can't you switch seats with me?"

"Ahaha. No way."

"That's too blunt… Hong, this will come back as karma. Remember that."

"Karma my ass. I'll just burn it away~"

Hong Yeon-hwa snorted. Having already passed through the trial of Gop-hwa,

Hong Yeon-hwa confidently shrugged her shoulders.

Baek Ahrin grumbled as she sat down.

As we waited chatting for a while, soon the lecture hall door opened and the professor entered.

“Ah, sorry I’m late. I’m Professor Alida Bali, in charge of the Monster Taming and Response course.”

She’s a woman with short bobbed hair wearing round glasses.

No significant aura was observed. The mana in her body wasn’t vast either. Her physique wasn’t particularly developed. She seems to be what’s commonly called a research professor.

The woman in a white coat… Professor Alida bowed her head as soon as she stood on the podium.

“I apologize for the inconvenience, but please everyone come outside. This overview explanation will be conducted outdoors.”

– Clatter

The students got up from their seats, looking puzzled.

Soon, under the professor’s guidance, students filed out the door in an orderly manner. Baek Ahrin looked at Hong Yeon-hwa.

Baek Ahrin asked with a twitching corner of her mouth.

“…It’s karma, isn’t it? Want to burn it away?”

“Shut… up. Nothing’s changing, you know?”

Our group also stood up from our seats.

I floated my body with wind without much surprise.

I had taken this course in the original work. Even if it proceeds differently from the original, I had been observing the bustling preparations outside.

'Are they going to show us a special specimen?'

This lecture is just an overview introduction, not a formal session.

Students who lose interest here might drop out in droves, so they'll likely show something special to spark interest.

In the original work, the monster shown changed each time…

I lightly extended my senses. I analyzed the mana being received from far away.

Though it could be clearly known through observation, such unique mana could be felt even from afar.

'I hope they show a unicorn.'

A pure white energy clearly felt even from far away.

The blatantly protruding mana of a unicorn was felt.

I secretly hoped the professor would show a unicorn.

After losing the Baicon's horn last time, I speculated that since the mana properties are somewhat similar, the compatibility might be good…

Though I've collected enough data through observation, facing it up close might feel different somehow.

Of course, contact would be impossible, right? It's a monster that extremely dislikes contact with external entities.

Carelessly trying to touch it might result in… being skewered to death by its horn that's no different from a spear.

Still, just being able to sense it up close would be enough.

I floated out following the professor's guidance.

– Wooong…!

'?'

That's when it happened.

The pure white unicorn's energy from far away trembled as if an earthquake had struck.

My body flinched at the resonance that seemed to shriek and writhe in shock.

'Why is it acting like that? I didn't do anything?'

I tilted my head at the sudden anomaly.

CHAPTER 176
GUARANTEED BY A UNICORN… (3)

Lee Hayul followed Professor Alida.

The students moved in an orderly manner behind her.

Hayul also floated along behind the professor, propelled by wind.

“Though I said outside, there’s actually a lot to show you inside as well.”

Professor Alida, who was leading the way, opened her mouth. She seemed to want to provide explanations to keep them from getting bored before arriving.

“This is a monster research facility built within Shio-ram, and we also breed monsters here for smooth data and specimen acquisition… Here’s a question.”

The professor, who had been making clicking footsteps, suddenly raised one finger.

“How many years ago did the Great Cataclysm occur?”

“Exactly 200 years ago!”

An answer came immediately after the question. The professor smiled and wiggled her finger.

“Quick answer and correct. What’s the student’s name?”

“Cheongmyeong class, Bella Aletova!”

“I’ll remember one point for you. Was that too classic a method? I’m sorry.

But this way is definitely better for eliciting answers."

Professor Alida continued with an awkward smile.

"So, returning to the question, the Great Cataclysm refers to the chain reaction of dungeon outbreaks that occurred on a global scale 200 years ago."

The Great Cataclysm. That word that appears in every history book. It's also the main reason why the world has become this way.

The chain reaction of dungeon outbreaks that followed. Hayul's expression crumpled at that part.

The two dungeon outbreaks he had experienced so far – Shipnaha and the one in China.

Almost dying after being beaten like a dog by Aerulus in Shipnaha, and nearly crossing the River Styx after being poisoned by the Twin-headed Venom Dragon in China.

None of them were good memories. Especially the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, being a recent event, left him in a bad mood.

Regardless of Hayul's feelings, the professor's explanation continued.

"This is generally how history books describe it."

Dungeons appeared all over the world with the Great Cataclysm, and humanity suffered from the monsters that poured out of the rampaging dungeons…

"…is what they say. It's not wrong, but strictly speaking, it's not entirely accurate either. Bella Aletova, do you know why?"

"Um… I don't know!"

The student who had been rolling her eyes for a moment answered hesitantly.

Professor Alida chuckled at the quite different attitude from before and replied.

“Official records show that the first monsters were documented even before the Great Cataclysm.”

“What?”

“To be precise, they were animals and plants that became monsters due to the influence of mana.”

Many students’ eyes widened. Professor Alida nodded with satisfaction at the openly admiring reactions.

“The first recorded monster was an electric mouse, and the next was a gorilla that controlled and wore dirt like armor.”

The mouse probably manifested a unique ability like [Lightning Discharge], and the gorilla something like [Earth Manipulation].

“A dog that breathed fire, a cat that shot wind slashes with its claws, and so on… They were bizarre creatures incomprehensible by the common sense of the time before the Great Cataclysm.”

Bizarre creatures, monsters, magical beasts… The term ‘monster’ was casually coined by influential countries at the time.

“In summary, mana existed before the Great Cataclysm, and there were animals and plants that became monsters due to its influence. In academia, this type is called primal species.”

Professor Alida paused there for a moment and looked back at the students following her.

Some students had their eyes wide open as if they had heard something incredible, while others had nonchalant attitudes as if they already knew.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin had nonchalant attitudes. They both seemed to have learned this during their successor training.

Elia looked curious as if it was new information to her, but she was taking it in stride.

As the professor surveyed the students' reactions, her gaze also turned to Hayul.

Seeing Hayul's indifferent expression, the professor clicked her tongue in disappointment and turned back to face forward.

"I've been talking for too long. The conclusion is…"

– Thud

Professor Alida's footsteps stopped. She looked around for a moment, then turned her head to face the students.

In a strange silence, the professor spoke the conclusion with a rather serious face.

"Monster research is, in some ways, quite meaningless."

"What?"

A dumb response came from one student's mouth. It was because the conclusion was so sudden.

"Ahaha. Was that too abrupt? I'll continue with the supporting explanation."

As if she had expected such a reaction, the professor shrugged and pointed around.

The students' gazes turned to where her finger was pointing… towards the glass walls.

They had come down to the basement at some point.

The basement had a long grid-like structure, with various types of monsters inside glass walls installed in each block.

"There are so many types of monsters, and they change for all sorts of reasons. Some are born as mutations from the start, or their physical structure changes due to dungeon influence, or their structure differs for each individual due to unique abilities, or their structure changes again as the monster grows…"

Mutations, dungeon backups, unique abilities, physical growth…

"Anyway, for all sorts of reasons, data accumulated over years of effort often becomes useless at crucial moments. But! Still, researchers including myself are working hard to study monsters even at this moment, trying to find out something."

– Clap!

The professor, who had been deflated, raised her voice and clapped her hands.

"This course, 'Monster Taming and Response,' is intended to study the information accumulated like this and practice directly against monsters. We'll also study breeding methods on the side."

"May I ask a question?"

"Yes, of course. Student's name?"

"Usu class……"

"……"

The general overview explanation ended. Then students who seemed interested in the lecture started asking questions.

The professor seemed pleased with this and answered sincerely.

But Hong Yeon-hwa's side didn't seem particularly interested. Though she listened attentively to the explanation, perhaps it wasn't enough to warrant questions.

"Yawn…"

She even yawned quietly. Though she tried to be discreet, perhaps feeling self-conscious about doing it openly, she turned her head and covered her mouth with her hand.

Hong Yeon-hwa turned her head, and her eyes met Hayul's.

Hayul could see her because he opened his eyes when looking at Hong Yeon-hwa.

"……"

Her eyes, beautiful like jewels, opened wide.

Soon her eye corners trembled, and heat rose to her earlobes and cheeks.

Hayul was floating at eye level with the wind.

Thanks to that, Hong Yeon-hwa's changes were very visible to the naked eye.

"Uh, um…"

Hong Yeon-hwa's voice trembled pathetically.

Hong Yeon-hwa's reaction was full of bewilderment and embarrassment.

Tilting his head at that, Hayul slightly leaned forward.

– Smooch

An embarrassing sound was heard. A soft sensation touched his lips. A warm heat was clearly transmitted.

Her fragrant body scent intensified.

He withdrew his lips after the brief contact.

He felt regret as the happy sensation moved away.

At the same time, he also felt embarrassment that made his solar plexus tingle.

His body also felt strangely warm.

In any case, it wasn't a bad feeling.

Smacking his lips with needless regret, he observed Hong Yeon-hwa.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa was frozen stiff like a stone with her mouth hanging open blankly.

"Hehe."

That sight was quite amusing, making him smile broadly.

He covered his mouth with his hand and giggled.

"…Ugh, haa…"

Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly groaned and squeezed her eyes shut.

Startled by her sudden gasping, Hayul clung to Hong Yeon-hwa.

"Yeon-hwa… are you in pain?"

He looked up at Hong Yeon-hwa while grabbing and shaking her arm.

Just as he was about to activate Homogenization, Hong Yeon-hwa's tightly closed eyes opened slightly.

Her half-lidded red eyes looked down at Hayul.

"It's hard…"

"What?"

Flare… The flames inside Hong Yeon-hwa fluctuated.

They had been quiet lately, but Hayul tilted his head at the flames burning stickily again.

"Yeon-hwa, Yeon-hwa? Why are you suddenly… Oh, oh shit, wait a second."

Baek Ahrin, who had been looking at Hayul and Hong Yeon-hwa with strange eyes, suddenly panicked and reached out her hand.

She placed her hand on Hong Yeon-hwa's back and poured out the energy of Changhae.

Sizzle… Changhae poured over the stickily fluctuating Gop-hwa.

The Gop-hwa was still burning stickily, but it gradually regained its original momentum under Changhae's suppression.

Blinking at the sudden situation, Hayul slightly observed the surroundings.

Perhaps because a small commotion had occurred, some gazes were focused in this direction.

The professor's gaze was also there.

"Ah, my side feels chilly."

Professor Alida, wearing round glasses, had an indescribable expression.

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Even after the commotion subsided, the professor's lecture continued.

– Grrrr…

The lump wriggled. A strange sound filled the ears.

Soon, something long suddenly protruded from the lump.

Rough gray outer skin that popped out of the black lump.

Legs that came out from all directions supported the body, and the neck that came out from the front stretched out long.

"A turtle?"

A student muttered. As if in response, its eyelids opened and yellow eyes flashed.

"Correct. It's a Black Iron Turtle, belonging to the standard 6th tier."

Professor Alida nodded and tapped on the glass wall.

– Groooak…

A dull cry was heard as the Black Iron Turtle's mouth opened slowly.

Its shell glistened under the light. The dark black shell, polished to a shine, with its rugged spine-like protrusions, gave off quite a threatening aura.

"Now, as I said, this monster is called a Black Iron Turtle, and similar

specimens are collectively called Black Iron Turtles."

Black Iron Turtle. Hayul felt a strange sense of familiarity at that. It was because he had hunted so many of them in the original work.

"The reason it's called 'black iron' is because that rugged shell is made of black iron ore."

Black iron.

It's one of the mana-infused ores discovered after the Great Cataclysm, named 'black iron' because it looks like iron imbued with a deep black color.

"Thanks to its high black iron content, it's like carrying a sturdy fortress on its back."

Black iron is mostly used in armaments.

It's not a difficult material to work with, so just melting and hammering it into shape makes for decent armor.

While not indestructible, it becomes quite hard and accepts mana fairly well.

Black iron is also relatively easy to obtain.

The population of Black Iron Turtles is not small. Official farming dungeons where Black Iron Turtles appear are operated all over the world.

Black iron is also mined from mines. Thanks to this, the supply is plentiful, making it easy to obtain if desired.

In short, it's a cost-effective material.

It's reasonably hard and absorbs mana well. The price isn't burdensome, so it's good for making multiple spare weapons and stockpiling for emergencies.

Especially in his second playthrough, when he mastered all kinds of weapons, he directly processed black iron to use as armaments.

The second playthrough character was an extreme close combat specialist.

He could handle pretty much any weapon a human could use, but he couldn't afford to cover all those weapons with good artifacts.

So he compromised and made his own armaments mainly using black iron to equip himself.

"Is there anyone who'd like to face it directly?"

The professor suddenly said that after finishing her brief explanation of the Black Iron Turtle.

"What? Is that allowed? If we accidentally subdue it…"

"It's fine, we have many Black Iron Turtles. That one isn't a special specimen, so there's no problem even if you subdue it."

A student asked in bewilderment at the sudden suggestion to beat up a research monster, and the professor replied nonchalantly.

"The really important specimens are very strictly protected, so don't worry."

At the professor's explanation, several students fell into contemplation.

It would be tempting since the manager herself said it was okay and safety was guaranteed.

[I'd like to experience it directly]

"Yes, yes, good. Student's name is…"

[Lee Hayul]

"Uh, um… Yes, Lee Hayul. Come this way."

Hayul felt the same way.

Though he had subdued many Black Iron Turtles in the original work, he hadn't done it directly.

Hearing the explanation, it seemed this was an average specimen, so it would be easy to compare with the information from the original work.

He raised his hand brightly and applied.

For some reason, the end of the professor's words dragged a bit, but she accepted.

The students looked towards Hayul at the characteristically blunt voice of the Necklace of Confession.

Those gazes were quite strange.

They were gazes filled with worry and anxiety.

That felt quite ridiculous to him.

Though he had returned in this state, wasn't he still a superhuman who had killed a Twin-headed Venom Dragon?

It was closer to a lizard, but its basic class was still that of a formidable dragon species.

Though weakened as an undead, and greatly weakened due to his unstable state… it was still a high-tier monster.

But what were these gazes? These gazes of concern for a young child rushing at a monster…

Pouting his lips, he observed his own state.

Tiny arms and legs, pristine white skin that looked like it had never

experienced hardship, a small frame that looked like it should be held in a guardian's arms…

…While it was a appearance worthy of concern, considering his actual strength, it wasn't to the degree of needing worry.

"Hayul, are you really going to do it yourself?"

"Will you be alright? In your current state…"

"Wouldn't it be better to do it a bit later?"

[Don't worry]

[I absolutely won't get hurt]

"You, didn't you come back in quite a state after saying that?"

[I'm sorry…]

He even received concern from Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, and Elia, who should know his level well…

But he sincerely wanted to experience it directly, so he stepped forward confidently.

The professor rummaged through her pockets and pulled out a bracelet.

Observing it, he saw it was an artifact with built-in protective functions.

The professor strode over.

She seemed to want to put the bracelet on him.

"Here, this is a protective artifact. Don't worry, it won't fall off…"

The sleeve and arm warmer on his left arm were rolled up, revealing a glimpse of the silver prosthetic hand. The professor's eyes trembled.

“Please… proceed with the practical exercise.”

The professor calmly put the bracelet on him and lowered his sleeve.

Hayul nodded glumly.

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Ziiing… A small entrance appeared in the center of the large glass wall. As soon as he entered through it, the entrance closed.

– Grrrr…

The Black Iron Turtle bared its teeth as an outsider invaded its home turf.

Heat waves rose from its enormous, vicious fangs that would put a wild boar’s to shame.

Turtles are said to have tremendous jaw strength. An average person would be torn in half if bitten by those.

‘Power of Observation.’

He turned his observation to scrutinize the Black Iron Turtle in great detail.

The mana flowing through its outer skin, the black iron-containing shell, tough muscles, skeletal structure connected in bizarre forms, a surprisingly large brain, internal organs with some essential ones missing.

The veins carrying blood and the circuits carrying mana, the location and strength of the mana stone acting as the core…

All sorts of information crammed into his mind. It wasn’t to a burdensome degree. He accepted it and interpreted it step by step.

Interpretation complete.

Though not burdensome, operating it so meticulously made his head a bit heavy.

After shaking his head to clear it, he raised his mana.

Mana gushed out from the core. The mana that circulated through the circuits was released outside the body.

Pure white mana flickered for an instant like a lion's mane. Admiring reactions followed from outside the glass wall.

Among them were Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, and Elia who had been worried about him.

That made him feel strangely proud.

While overconfidence is the path to death, it was still a pretty good feeling.

Controlling his rising mouth corners, he manipulated his mana…

– Wooooong…!

'?'

Suddenly, his body flinched. Not through observation but mana sensing, a blatant energy fluctuated far away.

'Why is it like that?'

The pure white and pure energy, though not as much as his, violently surged.

It was the presence of a unicorn felt from far away.

It suddenly swelled up crazily.

– Bang!

A very faint sound reached his ears. It was the sound of something crashing.

–…!… Escaped…! Coming… that way…!

“Y-Yes? What’s coming?”

A faint sound was also heard from the professor. He faintly picked up the communication from the smartwatch the professor was wearing.

‘Escape, coming, pure white energy?’

The energy was gradually getting closer.

No, the distance was closing at an incredibly fast speed.

The faint presence swelled in size.

– Kwaaang!

An explosion sounded. Not from far away. A hole was blasted right in the ceiling above.

The research building was dyed red. An unpleasant siren blared loudly.

In that brief moment, something pure white dropped down from the ceiling.

There was no landing sound.

It… the unicorn that landed in quite an elegant posture looked this way.

‘Ooh… ’

Hayul forgot the situation for a moment and admired it.

Its appearance was that of a horse. But it was enormous, easily two to three times the size of a normal horse.

Snow-white fur that truly deserved to be called pure white.

Its long legs were stretched straight, standing firmly on the ground, and a lush mane fluttered majestically on its neck.

Above all, that horn – the unicorn's most distinctive feature.

It was so huge that it could skewer and carry ten of him lined up in a row.

'It's similar.'

Also, the nature of its mana was very clean. It was about on par with Hayul at the beginning of the semester.

The words purity and innocence immediately came to mind.

Feeling mana from an entity other than himself, those words instantly surfaced. He understood why Professor Liana had said such things.

That's when it happened. The unicorn stretched out its leg. Its long leg approached without a sound.

Hayul quietly tilted his head.

There was no hostility. Rather, those gentle eyes were full of inexplicable favor and friendliness.

The approaching unicorn suddenly extended its face.

Even those who had been in a panic over the emergency situation blankly focused their gaze on that mystical sight.

Hayul instinctively reached out one hand as well.

And then…

– Chomp

[Huh?]

The unicorn bit Hayul's nape. It didn't hurt.

He was lifted with an extremely careful attitude, as if handling something very precious.

For some reason, strength drained from his body.

It was like the sight of a mother cat carrying her kitten by the scruff.

The unicorn leapt towards the hole in the ceiling without hesitation, as if it had no more business here.

'?'

A question mark floated above Hayul's head.

CHAPTER 177
WHEN A UNICORN SUDDENLY APPEARED (1)

A sudden explosion erupted, and the emergency alarm sirens blared loudly.

The basement of the research building, now lit by emergency lights, was dyed red and transformed into an ominous atmosphere.

Researchers scrambled to assess the sudden situation, security personnel rushed in immediately, and students calmly drew their weapons to prepare for battle.

Everyone urgently assessing the situation suddenly froze.

They all stared blankly at the same spot.

It was a mystical sight.

Inside the glass wall where monsters were confined. A pure white horse gracefully fell from the hole blasted in the ceiling.

Its pure white color caught everyone's attention even amidst the red-tinted surroundings.

Its massive body made adult men look like children in comparison.

And the long horn proudly jutting out from the center of its forehead, as if flaunting its majesty.

"A unicorn?"

Professor Alida muttered. Too stunned to fix her half-fallen glasses, she stared blankly at the unicorn.

Working at this research facility, she received reports on the monster breeding status. Information on unicorns was included.

Shio-ram was raising unicorns.

Not long after Shio-ram was established, during the time when the Principal was active.

The Principal brought in unicorns and provided them with an area in an empty space on the grounds.

That area became a habitat for the unicorns.

It was a paradise just for unicorns, with vegetation and grass leaves growing vigorously under the blessing of growth, and a lake of pure water without any impurities.

They were treated differently from the low-tier monsters brought in for specimens and experiments and kept in isolation.

That's because unicorns are very rare specimens.

Unicorns are commonly high-grade fantasy creatures.

Also, due to their small population, they are hard to find even in high-level dungeons or the Demonic Realm.

"Why is a unicorn here…?"

So it was puzzling.

There's a separate area for unicorns. Not just students, but even faculty members can't approach without permission.

It's an area with no outside interference except for the very few personnel who occasionally enter to collect samples and record information.

The unicorns are living well together in that area.

So there's no reason for them to come out.

But it came out.

Suddenly leaping that long distance, blasting a hole in the floor, and landing gracefully in front of Lee Hayul.

'In front of student Lee Hayul?'

Everyone's gaze alternated between the unicorn and Lee Hayul.

Only that area was pure white in the crimson space.

It was because of the bright beam of light falling from the hole in the ceiling, and because both beings themselves were pure white.

Unicorns are commonly called white horses. Their fur is white, and the mane growing majestically on their neck is also white.

Lee Hayul was similar. His hair was snow-white, and the pure white mana undulating over his body flickered like a mane.

Also, their pure and chaste auras were quite similar.

"Wow…"

A student opened their mouth in admiration. Even though sirens were still blaring and warning lights flashing, they couldn't stop their admiration.

Pure white and beautiful… an innocent and pitiful young child, and a unicorn standing tall with a majestic figure looking down at the child.

It was like a scene from a painting.

At that, everyone stopped moving and stared at the mystical sight.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who was about to smash the glass wall and rush towards Lee Hayul as soon as the explosion occurred, was the same.

Normally she would have beaten up that monster approaching Lee Hayul, unicorn or not.

But because the atmosphere between the two was so mystical, even Hong Yeon-hwa paused her movements for a moment to observe the situation.

Eventually, the two beings receiving everyone's gaze moved.

The unicorn strode towards Lee Hayul, stretching its long legs.

Lee Hayul carefully extended one hand towards the white horse slowly approaching.

It was like a painting, as if a scene from a fairy tale was unfolding before their eyes, and everyone swallowed in anticipation and excitement.

And then…

– Chomp

[Huh?]

The unicorn suddenly bit Lee Hayul's nape.

Lee Hayul, who had been carefully reaching out his hand, froze.

The pure white mana undulating over his body scattered.

Suddenly Lee Hayul's body trembled, then went limp.

The unicorn lifted Lee Hayul, holding him very carefully as if handling something precious.

Like a mother cat carrying her kitten, the unicorn lifted Lee Hayul and suddenly turned its head to survey the gazes fixed on it.

The atmosphere changed.

The eyes that had been bright and lively in front of Lee Hayul suddenly became indifferent.

After glancing around indifferently, the unicorn leapt towards the hole in the ceiling without hesitation.

Its attitude showed no lingering attachment, as if it had no more business here.

Those who had been immersed in the fairy tale-like scene blinked blankly.

“What the hell is that crazy horse-headed bastard?”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had suddenly lost her lover, belatedly contorted her face.

Hong Yeon-hwa clenched her fist tightly. Mana gathered, and soon fierce flames arose.

She pulled back her fist. The flames that had arisen ignited. Her fist shot forward. A red line was drawn as it smashed into the glass wall.

– Kwaaang!

An explosion that instantly drowned out the siren sound erupted. Crash! The specially made glass wall to prevent monster escapes crumbled in one hit.

Without delay, Hong Yeon-hwa leapt through the hole in the ceiling, chasing after the unicorn.

As she came up through the hole, a green grass field spread out. The research building they had just entered was visible almost right in front.

Hong Yeon-hwa turned her head, following the presence.

It wasn't clearly visible. Only after enhancing her eyesight with mana could she see a white dot disappearing over the horizon.

Flare! Gop-hwa spread throughout her entire body. Her physical abilities were doubled as the heavily packed mana combusted.

She stomped down on the ground as if crushing it and propelled her body forward.

Frowning intensely, she kicked off the ground. There was no sign of closing the distance. Rather, it was gradually getting farther.

Unicorn. The representative of fantasy creatures. Its tier is high and its physical abilities are excellent.

Distance? It's farther than expected, but not so far that she can't catch up.

It's within Gop-hwa's range. If she fires Gop-hwa indiscriminately, she can definitely hit that horse-head.

But if she does that, Lee Hayul will be in danger.

Hong Yeon-hwa is quite confident in controlling Gop-hwa, but she couldn't be certain that Lee Hayul wouldn't suffer even the slightest harm in the process.

'Expansion Ability.'

Whoosh…! The flames that had swelled up roughly once contracted.

'Quench Fire.'

Flare… The contracted flames seeped into Hong Yeon-hwa's body.

The sparks of Gop-hwa subsided.

Instead, Gop-hwa exploded inside Hong Yeon-hwa's body. The Gop-hwa that

wasn’t released externally combusted internally.

– Kwaaang!

The ground she stomped on exploded. Hong Yeon-hwa’s body stretched out long over the cracked earth.

Tremendous acceleration. Her body, amplified incomparably more than usual, pushed off the ground.

‘I’ll kill that horse bastard.’

Unicorns are precious fantasy creatures. They’re hard to find even in dungeons or the Demonic Realm, and even if found, it’s incredibly difficult to bring them back intact.

They’re also creatures with a fairly good reputation.

A peculiar type that detests impurity and chaos, even skewering and killing other monsters.

Due to their emphasis on purity, they are somewhat docile towards people with clean bodies and minds.

That didn’t matter.

No matter how precious and expensive it was, Hong Yeon-hwa didn’t want to leave that thing alone, which dared to bite Lee Hayul and run away.

Boiling emotions. The Gop-hwa imbued with those emotions burned even more explosively.

Sensing that fierce momentum, the unicorn turned its head to check behind. The distance that had been gradually widening suddenly narrowed rapidly.

Though the flames had subsided, an aura twice as large and ferocious approached.

The unicorn kicked off the ground in panic.

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She missed by a hair's breadth.

"Aaaagh! Shit!"

Hong Yeon-hwa, who let out a shriek, grabbed her hair.

A hair's breadth. She closed the distance in an instant. Her amplified body caught up to the long distance in less than a minute, chasing right behind.

She reached out her hand. She planned to first grab the horse to stop it, then beat it up while retrieving Lee Hayul.

Right before that, the space in front of the unicorn split open. A pure white space that seemed to be pulled apart left and right. The unicorn leapt straight into it.

Hong Yeon-hwa's hand brushed the horse's tail. The slightly touched tail hairs disintegrated, and the space closed.

Right in front of Hong Yeon-hwa's nose.

"Aagh!"

Her insides boiled. The unresolved emotions combusted incompletely. Her chest felt stuffy, and she just wanted to smash something.

"Whoa… You're really angry, huh?"

Baek Ahrin, who arrived shortly after, was able to face Hong Yeon-hwa growling like a fierce dog.

Hong Yeon-hwa turned her head.

Baek Ahrin shrugged at the fierce glare in which unresolved emotions were bubbling.

“Whoa whoa… Calm down. You seem too excited.”

“How can I not be excited? That crazy horse-head took my child and ran away?”

“My… child…? Um… Anyway, cool your head and think about it. There’s no way Hayul would be taken down by one unicorn.”

Baek Ahrin continued speaking while smoothing out her wry expression.

“His physical abilities seem weakened, but his other skills should be fine, right? He has magic too. If he just unleashes spirits, he can turn the surroundings into a wasteland. If needed, he could even just release Gop-hwa like crazy and burn everything, unicorn or whatever.”

“Sigh… I know that too.”

Baek Ahrin’s explanation was something Hong Yeon-hwa also knew.

Though an undead, Lee Hayul is a powerful superhuman who killed a Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

He had become so strong that even Hong Yeon-hwa couldn’t predict the outcome if they fought seriously now.

Nevertheless, the reason Hong Yeon-hwa chased after him was because that wasn’t a reason to just sit still.

And…

“Then why did Hayul go limp like that?”

She had seen Lee Hayul go limp when his nape was bitten. Seeing that, the suspicion arose that maybe he couldn't respond?

"Even considering that, if the master was in danger, spirits would have popped out in droves. And going limp… it could be similar to a kitten?"

"What kitten nonsense are you talking about?"

Hong Yeon-hwa's face was filled with bewilderment.

When you grab a kitten's nape, it stops moving or calms down. Hong Yeon-hwa knew this too.

Lee Hayul? When the unicorn bit his nape, his body trembled, then went limp.

It was cute.

'…Maybe it is similar?'

It might be a more useful tip than expected. I should use it later.

Hong Yeon-hwa cleared her throat and projected a hologram from her smartwatch.

A map appeared on the hologram. A red dot pulsed in one corner of the map.

"What's that?"

Baek Ahrin tilted her head and asked from beside her.

"Hayul's location."

Hong Yeon-hwa replied nonchalantly while checking the map.

Baek Ahrin blinked.

"…Did you put a tracker on him?"

“I installed a location sharing app on Hayul’s smartwatch.”

“Um… did you get his consent?”

“He would give permission if I asked, right?”

“So you didn’t…”

“Hayul would definitely allow it.”

Hong Yeon-hwa replied shamelessly and headed towards the direction where the red dot was located.

* * *

These days, I’ve been thinking that life is quite bumpy.

I’m experiencing all sorts of things. Most of them are incidents where I stuck my head out and got hit, but occasionally there are events that come crashing down even though I didn’t intend them.

In fact, I wonder if I’m living with bad luck.

Hasn’t my life been quite hard since childhood? Even after coming to this world, I’ve gone through all kinds of hardships.

Of course, there was also luck that seemed to fall in several layers of heavenly fortune, but I think there was more bad luck.

At that point, I reconsidered the current situation.

Am I in a situation where I’ve been hit by bad luck right now?

– Purr?

[It tickles]

…It was ambiguous.

I sighed deeply and gently stroked the unicorn that was rubbing its head against me.

Though it's just a horse, it wiggled its eye corners as if smiling brightly and pushed its head in even more.

And naturally, the tip of its horn would occasionally poke my body.

It didn't hurt.

I stroked the horn with a strange expression.

This isn't the unicorn that bit and brought me here earlier.

The horn of the unicorn pushing its head in now is cute rather than magnificent, only a bit bigger than my fist.

It's a baby unicorn that hasn't reached adulthood yet.

My skin feels a bit prickly.

I slightly turned on my observation. I observed the unicorns surrounding and staring at me.

A nest-like place made by gathering things like leaves to make a bed. Placed on top of that with the baby unicorn, I was receiving the full attention of the unicorns.

Their eyes are very bright and lively. They're full of inexplicable goodwill, benevolence, and curiosity.

I glumly observed right in front of me.

Right in front was a pile of some kind of fruit. Fruit that the unicorns had brought and presented.

'Well, all sorts of things happen.'

I was bitten by a unicorn and kidnapped to a unicorn's nest-like place.

I sighed deeply and tapped on the hologram.

While leaving messages to acquaintances not to worry, I picked up a fruit and took a big bite.

– Nom nom…

The texture was quite nice. It was refreshing too.

I bit into the fruit with a strange expression.

For some reason, the unicorns' expressions were observed to be satisfied.

* * *

[Anyone taken the Comprehensive Combat Logic lecture?][11]

[Looking for a junior to eat with at the cafeteria][0]

[Spear>Sword. I'll only accept rebuttals through duels][32]

[Someone massacred the green ghosts in the 3-23 Forest Dungeon][6]

[Looking for the owner who left their pad at the chilly seaside cafe in the commercial district][16]

…

[Trending!][Unicorn invaded during Monster Taming and Response lecture and ran away biting the special admission student][563]

CHAPTER 178
WHEN A UNICORN SUDDENLY APPEARED (2)

[Trending!][Unicorn invaded during Monster Taming and Response lecture and ran away biting the special admission student][563]

[Author: Red Summer1]

…

Summary.

During practice, a unicorn suddenly fell through a hole in the ceiling.

After brief eye contact between the special admission student and the unicorn, the unicorn bit the student and ran away.

The Gop-hwa and Changhae heirs were shocked and chased after the unicorn.

…

-Red Summer2: ?

└Red Summer2: Crazy bastard

-Blue Spring1: Senior, please come to your senses

-Orange Autumn1: Is it already evaluation period? I'm struggling too. Hang in there

└Red Summer3: It's only the 1st week of the 2nd semester, senior…

└Orange Autumn1: No way that can't be right it's so hard and grueling

already how can it only be the 1st week that's impossible

└Orange Autumn2: Wow the translation is really good lol

-Red Summer3: This protractor is too sharp

└Red Summer1(Author): No, it's real, ask anyone, how many people are here right now

└Red Summer3: The statement that the unicorn bit and took him is a bit much

└Orange Autumn3: Gasp

└Red Summer4: Take your hands off the hologram!

-Red Summer5: Sung-hyun, stop writing nonsense and train

└Red Summer6: It's not me, you bastard

└Red Summer5: There really is one

└Red Summer5: Stop writing nonsense comments and go train

└Red Summer6: Is this guy crazy

-Red Summer7: Is this real?

└Blue Winter1: I'm a unicorn and this is real

└Blue Spring2: Senior, aren't the graduating class busy?

└Blue Winter1: Now even on the community they're picking on me for being idle

'It's already spread… '

I glumly flipped through the hologram. Browsing through the free board, it

was full of posts related to me.

Shio-ram also has its own community.

It's in the form of an app installed on smartwatches, and I already had the app installed on the smartwatch I received from Shio-ram.

I didn't use it often. At that time… that is, right after I enrolled.

It was a time full of doubts about special admission, so my name was mentioned a lot even while pretending it wasn't me.

There was so much of it that I was afraid to look it up, so I just forgot about it after that.

Then suddenly I remembered and checked it out, but stories related to the unicorn were already spreading.

'Unicorn… '

Unicorn… I think it might be the most well-known species among fantasy creatures known to the public, along with dragons.

And it's also a very hard-to-find creature.

'Sigh.'

I got up from my seat with a deep sigh.

– Purr?

The baby unicorn that had been leaning on me looked up at me as if asking where I was going.

Also, the unicorn resting nearby… the one that brought me here, looked this way too.

Not just that.

The unicorns lying on the surrounding grass and walking gracefully stared intently at me.

'…There are quite a few.'

Because dozens of them are gathered, it doesn't feel real, but outside, even meeting one is considered extremely lucky…

I slipped out of the nest. Though crudely made with leaves and branches, it was surprisingly comfortable to use.

– Purr…

The baby unicorn bit my sleeve and pulled.

I had no choice but to wave my hand in the air. The space split left and right, and colorful spirits poured out from inside.

[Play with these guys]

Thinking this was just the right natural environment, I released the spirits. Though their self-awareness is faint, I often let them out since they like nature.

The baby unicorn was instantly buried in the colorful mass of light.

It didn't seem to mind as it started playing, rubbing against the spirits while letting out puffs of breath.

Leaving the baby unicorn, I looked around curiously.

The unicorn breeding ground… there were indeed very few traces of humans.

The traces left on the ground were at most from a handful of people coming and going briefly once every month or two.

Actually, there was no need to walk around.

I was thoroughly scanning the unicorn breeding ground with my observation.

But I walked around slowly to take a stroll and circulate my mana.

As I walked with my short legs, several nearby unicorns slowly followed.

– Purr…

I stopped walking. The unicorns following behind me also stopped.

I focused my mind. I imagined grabbing threads of will tapping on my head.

The emotions and thoughts of the unicorns were transmitted. It was a complex and vague mass of abstract notions, but it gradually adjusted and was interpreted.

Worry and concern… where are you going… you might get hurt…

'This is ridiculous.'

I tilted my head crookedly. Now of all things… to receive such looks from unicorns.

– Purr…

[Ah]

[Don't push…]

Eventually, they even started gently pushing my back towards the nest with their heads.

I resisted out of bewilderment, but overwhelmed by their numbers, I ended up being pushed back to the nest.

In the end, I returned to the nest after just ten minutes.

‘……’

– Purr

The baby unicorn that had been surrounded by spirits let out a welcoming cry.

.

.

.

[Uwegeeeee]

[It tickles]

Suddenly my waist trembled. A tickling sensation rushed through my outstretched legs.

It was because the baby unicorn had suddenly put its head on my legs and was rubbing against them.

[It’s heavy]

I reached out my fingers and tapped the unicorn’s head.

– Purr

[It tickles…]

Though it’s a baby, that’s still a unicorn. And I’m currently a human with an abnormal physique…

Thanks to that, my legs were completely pinned down.

It didn't hurt, but it was a bit uncomfortable. When I tickled its head to tell it to get off, it shook its head as if saying no while letting out a puff of breath.

I made a strange expression at that.

The symbolism of unicorns is widely known.

Purity, innocence, chastity.

As if to prove that, the aura possessed by unicorns is so pure and clean that it's hard to find any impurities.

And as if they have some unique ability, they're strange creatures that assess other beings on their own and determine how to treat them.

Of course, the assessment criteria here are the symbolism of unicorns.

'Purity and innocence and… chastity?'

My expression became even more wry.

Chastity… there are many factors, but the commonly known chastity refers to something a bit obscene.

But is it okay to apply that? As far as I know, unicorns like women, or am I mistaken?

'I'm not sure… '

Shaking my head, I continued what I was doing.

I've already sent messages to acquaintances telling them not to worry.

The lecture that was in progress… they'll probably count it as attendance. Honestly, if it's not counted as attendance after experiencing an incident like this, I'm fully prepared to protest.

So I sat down for a while without escaping right away.

This could be seen as a good thing.

It's rare to be able to sense unicorns this closely without just relying on the Power of Observation.

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Some time passed.

I activated my senses to detect the unicorns' aura in detail, and used the Power of Observation to thoroughly collect information about unicorns.

At the same time, I used Homogenization… operating Taesan to extract the vitality from the surroundings and absorb it into my body.

My body squirmed. My empty insides felt stuffed and full.

It felt like someone was grabbing and pulling on my limbs.

'I think it's almost ready… '

It feels like it could stretch out all at once if I pull a little more… but it can't cross a certain line and won't stretch.

The operation of vitality through Taesan.

Whether the practice of banging my head alone has paid off, there are gradual changes… but no definite results.

I've been gathering information by secretly observing Choi Jiyeon's training… but this wasn't enough.

'Should I directly ask her to show me just the vitality operation?'

I've already set up a schedule. I'm planning to start mentoring sessions with Choi Jiyeon from next week.

Probably once a week… maybe twice if we meet more often. That's the plan.

We can meet more than that if we both agree, but writing a report each time we meet makes once appropriate.

'If I say I'm curious, she'll probably show me.'

We're in a mentor relationship after all. If I ask out of curiosity, she'll demonstrate.

Also, I'm registered in the Gop-hwa family registry after all.

The Gop-hwa clan and Taesan clan have had a lot of exchanges as part of the Three Great Clans.

There were several people presumed to be Taesan members at the Gop-hwa clan I visited before.

Since they know everything about each other, there's probably nothing to hide.

It's not like I'm asking her to demonstrate some special expansion ability, so she'll probably agree to this much.

There was a lot to think about.

Observation and mana sensing, Taesan manifested through Homogenization and the operation of vitality.

With complex worries following that, my head throbbed for the first time in a while.

Recently, I've always been in someone's arms, so I had fewer headaches, but now that I'm alone again, my head hurt.

While rubbing my brow hard, I felt something strange.

Come to think of it, the baby unicorn that had been rubbing against me a lot was quiet.

I slightly turned on my observation.

At some point, the baby unicorn had fallen asleep using my leg as a pillow. No wonder there was no movement.

It was breathing very evenly with its eyes tightly closed.

A horse's fate is a good fate.

The absurdity was clearly visible on my expression. Instinctively, I reached out and poked its horn.

There was no reaction.

Even though its precious horn was being touched, the baby unicorn was just lost in dreamland without any reaction.

The horn is a very important part for unicorns.

The horn attached to unicorns never falls off until they die. That's how solid and firmly rooted it is.

Normally, they would have rammed into you the moment you tried to touch their horn…

Why do they trust me so much? I kept poking the horn with a strange look on my face.

If there's a symbol of unicorns, it's undoubtedly this horn.

In other words, the unicorn's horn is the body part that represents its uniqueness.

‘The Twin-headed Venom Dragon’s was its head.’

The Twin-headed Venom Dragon I killed before. One of its heads, which contained the uniqueness of disease, was missing.

Because of that, it couldn’t use its disease ability.

If it had become an undead with both heads… it would have become a 3rd tier monster like when it was alive.

‘Uniqueness… ’

The peculiarity that distinguishes an individual from others. Among those, something that particularly stands out and is embodied as an ability.

In other words, a unique ability.

Suddenly, I felt curious.

I sneakily reached out and stroked the baby unicorn’s horn.

I limited the range of observation to the horn. I received countless pieces of high-density data. I honed my senses sharply to interpret the energy transmitted through my palm.

I collected data. I used observation and mana affinity generously. My head felt heavy. Data accumulated momentarily in excess.

I adjusted it. I buried unnecessary things and pulled out what was needed. I compared the necessary things to create even more useful information.

Gradually, records accumulated.

These are records of the original text.

Homogenization is imitating this after modifying it to suit me.

Curiosity.

Can I imitate the function of that horn, which corresponds to a body part?

'Homogenization—'

– Pop!

'—?'

A strange sound was heard.

It wasn't a sound from far away.

It came from very close… from me.

– Pop pop…!

The sound continued.

A strange sensation was transmitted. The bizarre sensation of bones growing and skin being pushed out. Vibrations rang out from inside my body.

– Purr?!

The baby unicorn that had been sleeping using my leg as a pillow suddenly opened its eyes wide and looked up at me.

Other unicorns also turned their heads sharply and stared intently at me… at my forehead.

'…Forehead?'

I turned my observation inward.

Something is trying to grow inside my forehead.

[?]

Countless question marks floated above my head.

* * *

[Unique ability [Mana Affinity] is growing]

[Unique ability [Mana Affinity] is manifesting]

[Expansion ability [Homogenization] is manifesting]

…

[Player correction system: Pioneer level]

[Quest [Witness a Unicorn] achieved]

[Quest [Befriend a Unicorn] achieved]

[Quest [Tame a Unicorn] achieved]

[Points acquired]

…

[The Master of The Tower of Harmony's eyes sparkle]

[The Master of The Tower of Growth gives a look telling you to be quiet]

[The Master of The Tower of Harmony averts her gaze]

…

[Player correction system: Measurement level]

▸Mental state

…

[Purity]

[Innocence]

[Chastity]

…

▸Title

…

[Child Kidnapped by a Unicorn]

CHAPTER 179
WHEN A UNICORN SUDDENLY APPEARED (3)

Hong Yeon-hwa had experienced all sorts of things.

Most of them were due to Lee Hayul, who was like a precious child.

There were many instances where he shattered Hong Yeon-hwa's composure, striking it mercilessly. Just as she barely recovered her collapsed composure, another incident would strike again…

Though she received a lot of pain through this, it also became an opportunity for mental growth.

If she had to specify, it would be patience.

Previously, she would have lashed out with her fists at impulses she couldn't endure, but now she could hold back at least five times before striking.

After confirming Lee Hayul was safe, she didn't immediately attack the habitat of those horse-heads.

She calmly reported the situation with patience. Only after receiving permission did Hong Yeon-hwa enter the unicorn habitat.

"It doesn't seem like there's anything special. Did they just divide the area?"

"I'm not sure of the exact value, but the mana concentration is high. It looks like they're just maintaining the environment and letting them live freely."

Elia and Baek Ahrin also accompanied her.

Since they were together when the incident occurred, they received permission together.

The habitat they entered according to the manager's guidance was surrounded by a barrier that separated the inside and outside.

Inside the barrier was a field of blue grass stretching to the horizon.

It was mostly flat ground with consistent elevation, but occasionally there were small hills forming ridges.

"I wonder why the manager didn't accompany us, thinking we might do something here?"

While heading towards the location shown on the hologram, Baek Ahrin tilted her head while stroking her chin.

"Maybe they just let us go since we got permission from the administration?"

"Even with permission, they usually assign an escort. That's what we do too. Even without malicious intent, accidents can happen… and since they're monsters, it's usually for safety reasons."

"Does your family raise monsters too, Ahrin?"

"Yes, yes. Since our territory is so vast and rugged, we train many for transportation. I've ridden them a lot too."

The Changhae clan also raises monsters. While many are kept for research purposes, most are used for transportation.

The environments inside dungeons and the Demonic Realm are so harsh that even military transport vehicles have limited use.

As long as their rank is high enough, monsters have no problem with the chaotic mana waves and can outpace and outlast most transport vehicles.

Also, since the clan's territory is so vast and has many treacherous terrains, flexible transportation is essential.

“Ooh… I’d like to ride one too!”

“Come visit with Hayul later. I’ll give you one or two as gifts. Just keep in mind it’s a bit of a cold region, of course.”

As they walked for a while chatting, soon a few unicorns could be seen in the distance.

They seemed wary but curious, not looking like they would charge right at them.

“Tsk… they should have been like this earlier too.”

Hong Yeon-hwa found it quite displeasing. She clicked her tongue and shook her head.

They should have just stayed quietly in their habitat like this, why did they suddenly escape and run away biting a person?

She was holding back only because Lee Hayul said he had no injuries, but if there had been even a single scratch, she would have drawn her weapon immediately.

“Maybe they were mistaken?”

“Mistaken about what?”

Baek Ahrin, who was walking beside Hong Yeon-hwa, spoke up casually at her grumbling.

“About Hayul. Just looking at his mana properties, he’s even more pure than unicorns. So they might have mistaken him for one of their own.”

“What kind of mistake… Even if they’re horse-heads, there’s no way…”

No way… is there?

Hong Yeon-hwa tilted her head.

Lee Hayul's recently changed mana.

The color changed to pure white, and the purity increased much more than before.

Honestly, it's hard to tell if it's mana or just a mass of purity.

It's exactly the kind of properties unicorns would go crazy for.

It wouldn't be strange for them to think he's one of their own. Even if not, they might think he's a similar kind.

"…Could it be?"

"His energy is pure, his nature is innocent. His body is young and chaste, so it seems like unicorns would go wild and take him away."

"That's certainly… Wait, what's chaste?"

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been nodding her head with a puzzled expression, suddenly looked up.

Baek Ahrin tilted her head.

"Why are you suddenly getting angry? What's the problem now?"

"How the hell would you know if he did it or not, you bastard."

"Huh? A body containing pure mana must be chaste."

"…Ah?"

"What were you thinking? Don't tell me… it's what I'm thinking?"

A grin spread across Baek Ahrin's face.

Hong Yeon-hwa, realizing her mistake, backed away at the expression change filled with mischief, playfulness, and a ‘you’ve been caught’ look.

Baek Ahrin’s scolding shot out before she could.

“What kind of lewd… You’ve become so brazen.”

“Urk…”

Hong Yeon-hwa, groaning from the mental shock, gathered herself and started walking again.

The unicorn habitat was quite large. After some time passed, nest-like resting places could be seen here and there.

Soon, a group of unicorns huddled together came into view in the distance.

“Wow… How many are there?”

“They really formed a herd. It seems like Shio-ram has far more unicorns than the rest of the world combined.”

“He’s over there.”

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered while looking at the hologram. The red dot on the hologram was nearby. Lee Hayul was with that group of unicorns.

‘Sigh… ’

This sudden unicorn kidnapping incident.

It was another event that made her composure falter, but it probably wasn’t… Lee Hayul’s fault.

Probably.

– Purr!

That’s when it happened.

A cry was heard from the unicorn herd, and something pure white shot up into the sky.

“What’s that?”

Hong Yeon-hwa swallowed her bewilderment and put her hand on her waist.

The moment she grabbed the handle of the sword in the spatial pouch attached to her belt, her body froze.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes clearly recognized the white thing.

It was a unicorn. But the size was small.

Adult unicorns are usually three to four times larger than normal horses, but this one was about the size of a pony.

Also, compared to the horns of other unicorns that could easily skewer ten people at once, this one’s horn was much shorter and stubbier. It seemed to be a young individual.

She couldn’t help but stop moving when she saw Lee Hayul clinging to the back of that young unicorn.

“…What is this…”

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered blankly. Baek Ahrin and Elia blinked their eyes.

A hill full of blue life growing abundantly. A young unicorn hopping over it… Lee Hayul hanging on its back…

How skillfully he’s clinging on without any saddle or fixing device.

The distance quickly closed as the unicorn bounced a few times.

At some point, the unicorn stopped leaping and approached with its four

legs moving busily, clip-clopping.

Hong Yeon-hwa firmly grasped her dizzying consciousness.

Though it was a surreal sight, Lee Hayul was approaching majestically riding a unicorn.

"…You were having fun. Um… I have a lot to say, but for now, let's go back and…"

Hong Yeon-hwa continued calmly.

"Let's… talk…?"

Her words trailed off as she looked at Lee Hayul.

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked.

She doubted her vision. There was no problem.

Was mental manipulation at work? She drew upon Gop-hwa. She swept away all impurities in her body.

There was no mental manipulation either.

Hong Yeon-hwa opened her eyes after finishing her check.

The area around Lee Hayul was shining brightly. As if the sun was rising, a lively energy colored the surroundings.

The source of that radiance was… the horn that had sprouted on Lee Hayul's forehead.

'What the hell is that.'

Hong Yeon-hwa's consciousness snapped.

"Yeon-hwa!"

A voice full of happiness and joy.

It came from Lee Hayul's throat.

It was awkward.

It hadn't been long since she heard Lee Hayul's voice, but at the very least, she had never heard such a lively and vivid voice.

Soon after, Lee Hayul waved one hand vigorously with a bright smile.

His wide-open gray eyes were clearly visible.

"Yeon-hwa!"

The lovely and cute appearance, and the bright and lively behavior like a child of that age…

"Ugh."

It was too stimulating for Hong Yeon-hwa. She clutched her chest and bent over.

.

.

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It just felt good. There was no other way to explain it.

Lee Hayul attempted Homogenization based on the information from the unicorn's horn, and a horn grew on his forehead.

It wasn't intentional. What he intended was to imitate the function, not the physical organ.

But a horn grew. Something sprouted and protruded from his forehead with

a popping sound.

At that moment. Along with the manifestation of the physical organ, one function also manifested.

Purity.

A transition to a simple and pure way of thinking… without selfish and wicked thoughts.

Before he could even become aware, the purity sleeping within Lee Hayul surged up and devoured his reason.

Lee Hayul had no chance to resist.

To begin with, that purity is Lee Hayul's innate nature.

He was born with such a disposition from the start.

But an unfortunate life forcibly suppressed his innate nature. He just covered it with pessimistic and critical thinking for survival.

But due to the horn's function, his original innate nature was drawn out.

[Happiness!]

[Floating on clouds]

[Joy!]

[Relief]

[Gladness!]

[Welcome!]

Lee Hayul became like a young child without any filter.

The Necklace of Confession kept clicking incessantly, exposing the wearer's inner thoughts.

A parade of quite cute… childish language.

Moreover, the appearance of smiling purely without a care in the world, and the behavior of rolling around playing with the baby unicorn in the grass.

It was clearly an unusual sight.

Also… a very stimulating and lovely appearance.

Hong Yeon-hwa couldn't endure for long and collapsed, leaving two people.

"Hayul? Will you come here?"

Elia called out to Lee Hayul, erasing the strange expression on her face.

Lee Hayul's ears perked up.

Lee Hayul, who had been clinging to the baby unicorn and tickling it, suddenly raised his head.

Then without a moment's hesitation, he trotted over and arrived in front of Elia.

Though his eyes were closed again, he lifted his head to show his face, and Elia crouched down in front of Lee Hayul.

Then she reached out and stroked Lee Hayul's cheek.

Lee Hayul accepted Elia's touch without any resistance.

Rather, he let out a purring sound and pushed his cheek into Elia's hand.

[I like the touch]

[I'm happy]

[Pat me more]

[Rub me more]

[It's warm]

[It's soft]

The necklace also kept clicking, revealing his happy inner thoughts without any filter.

Elia's eyes curved gently at the adorably cute reaction.

"Our baby, what's got you so excited?"

[I just feel good!]

Lee Hayul answered with a bright smile.

[I feel good]

[I like Elia too!]

Lee Hayul poured out his answers rapidly, then leaped into Elia's arms.

Elia, who caught Lee Hayul as he suddenly flew into her, opened her eyes wide.

Soon, warm sensations and tickles rose from her embrace.

Looking down at her chest, she saw Lee Hayul's figure burying his face and rubbing against it.

The horn on his forehead kept poking her chest. Though small and cute, it was still a horn. But strangely, there was no pain at all.

"Oh my…"

Though she didn't understand why, she was truly delighted to see the child who was usually so shy clinging to her so enthusiastically.

Elia's expression melted. With a face dripping with maternal affection, she tightly hugged Lee Hayul, who was burying his face in her chest.

[Eeeeng]

"Ah, I'm sorry. Did it hurt?"

[It tickles]

[Tingly feeling]

When she touched the horn midway, he let out a gasp and roughly rubbed his face buried in her chest.

[Chest?]

[Soft]

[Warm warm]

That's when it happened.

Lee Hayul suddenly tilted his head and pressed Elia's upper chest with his palm.

"Hehehe. It tickles."

Elia giggled and twisted her body. The soft hair poked her skin, and the breath he exhaled tapped her cleavage.

[Huge chest]

[Like a cow]

Like a cow.

It could be seen as an obscene remark, but Elia didn't mind and patted Lee Hayul's back.

There was no lust felt from Lee Hayul.

Just a pure reaction like a baby.

The logic that her chest is so big it's like a cow.

Elia smiled gently and placed her hand on top of Lee Hayul's hand that was pressing her breast. With a playful face, she tapped the back of Lee Hayul's hand.

"Cows produce milk, you know? I don't have milk yet. Am I still a cow?"

[No milk?]

[Then not a cow…]

[I like milk]

[It's delicious!]

[But now it's not tasty…]

"Hmm? It's not tasty now? That's not good… I was planning to feed you lots later, it would be bad if you leave it then…"

Elia muttered while kneading Lee Hayul's cheeks as if troubled.

"…Your statement sounds a bit strange."

Baek Ahrin, who had been listening beside them, shook her head for a moment and then tapped Elia's shoulder.

"Elia, Elia. I want to hug Hayul once too."

"Hayul?"

Elia blinked and looked back and forth between Baek Ahrin and Lee Hayul.

“Hmm…”

Elia seemed to contemplate for a moment before gently detaching Lee Hayul from her embrace.

[Eeek]

[I don’t want to let go!]

Lee Hayul, who had been resisting fiercely.

After a brief struggle where he tried to grab her breasts, not wanting to separate, Lee Hayul was lifted up by his armpits.

[Puu…]

Lee Hayul, dangling in the air, puffed up his cheeks full of air.

Elia’s mouth corners twitched at the blatant sign of sulking. She wanted to bite those puffy cheeks hard.

“Hayul?”

[?]

Lee Hayul, who had been expressing his dissatisfaction, turned his head at the voice calling him.

Within the still functioning observation range, he sensed Baek Ahrin with a strange smile.

“Will you come here?”

Baek Ahrin spread her arms wide. Her ample bosom stretched out. It was a gesture offering an embrace.

Lee Hayul, who had been clinging eagerly to Elia, stopped in his tracks.

[Coldness]

[Chilliness]

[Cold air]

“Hmm?”

A chilly cold air wafted.

Both observation and mana sensing felt the same impression.

It felt like he would freeze solid if he approached.

It was a kind of aversion.

He really disliked the cold. The horrifyingly disliked sensation of body temperature cooling down. He liked the warm temperature of people.

He felt aversion to Baek Ahrin’s cold energy. He felt fear towards Baek Ahrin who had stabbed the player in the original story.

But did he dislike the current Baek Ahrin?

Lee Hayul’s mind, immersed in purity, turned.

He traced the memories after Shio-ram. He dug up the times he had received help from Baek Ahrin.

There were countless instances.

– Woong…

The horn pulsed. The horn that emitted a trembling vibration manifested its uniqueness.

A unicorn's horn instinctively grasps the other's nature and makes its own assessment.

"……"

Lee Hayul, who had been contemplating for a moment, moved.

He approached lightly and hugged Baek Ahrin eagerly.

Cool but ample flesh pressed against his face.

Lee Hayul buried his face in the flesh with a strange expression.

"Oh?"

Baek Ahrin, who had been waiting for Lee Hayul's choice, let out an exclamation.

It seems hugs are possible now, somehow.

Baek Ahrin smiled brightly and placed her hand on Lee Hayul's head.

.

.

.

[Ahrin doesn't have milk either?]

"Maybe later?"

* * *

"…Junior, did something happen?"

Lee Hayul shook his head desperately at Choi Jiyeon's question, which was asked with obvious bewilderment as she examined his complexion.

[No]

[I'm fine]

[Nothing happened]

[Nothing]

[Really]

"Ah, yes… I understand."

Choi Jiyeon nodded glumly at the intense denial.

Though she didn't look convinced at all, Lee Hayul forcibly changed the subject.

What happened, you ask?

He touched his forehead.

There's nothing. Not even a trace.

I didn't originally have a horn. Humans… fairies don't originally have horns as a body part.

So nothing happened.

– Hayul? Did you sleep well? Here, have a glass of milk.

Nothing should have happened…

– This? It's premium milk. I'll give you some rice cakes too, so eat it deliciously for lunch, okay?

These memories can't be real…

–… Hayul, you can't do that to others. So wait just a little bit. Okay?

He lowered his head with a deathly pale face.

He really hated himself.

– Slurp…

He opened the bottle cap and poured the contents into his mouth.

Pure white liquid flowed into his mouth.

It was warm.

* * *

[Player guarantee system: Measurement level]

▸Mental state

[Denial]

[Self-loathing]

[Despair]

[Desire]

[Impulse]

[Fear]

…

[Player correction system: Favorability]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

●●●●●●●●○○(81▹82/100)

[Fondness] [Gratitude] [Cow?] [Chick] [Apology] [Guilt]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●●○○○(69/100)

[Cold air] [Fondness] [Question] [Confusion] [Cow?] [Guilt]

CHAPTER 180
CHILDREN GROW UP FAST (1)

The mentoring date Lee Hayul had previously discussed with Choi Jiyeon arrived.

The meeting place was an ordinary cafe.

In the past, Lee Hayul didn't understand why people bothered to meet at cafes, but when actually making plans, he found there was no place more suitable than a cafe.

It's cool in summer and warm in winter. There are places to sit, and if you get hungry or thirsty, you can order food or drinks right away.

Cafes aren't hard to find either, so it was convenient to meet there first before going somewhere else.

– Jingle jingle

As he opened the door and entered, cold air poured out like a flood.

Now that it's summer, air conditioning is blasting everywhere you go. It was certainly a bit muggy outside.

Enjoying the coolness, Lee Hayul walked steadily inside, ignoring the stares pouring his way.

The seat where Choi Jiyeon was sitting was by the window on the first floor of the cafe where sunlight was coming in.

If they were meeting for a long time, they would have gotten a private room, but since they were going to leave right after meeting, they comfortably took a seat on the first floor.

Lee Hayul hopped over and sat across from Choi Jiyeon.

Choi Jiyeon, who had been resting her chin and looking at the scenery outside, turned her head.

Her green eyes stared at Lee Hayul.

“You came early. Good morning, junior.”

Choi Jiyeon opened her eyes wide. She seemed a bit flustered, then waved her hand slightly.

[Yes]

[Good morning, senior]

Lee Hayul bowed his head and observed Choi Jiyeon with his observation ability.

Choi Jiyeon’s complexion was much better this time. At the very least, she didn’t look like she was on the verge of death like last time.

Her complexion now could be attributed to just being tired.

It seemed she had somewhat shaken off her feelings of guilt towards Lee Hayul, as her attitude was fairly normal.

Of course, if observed in detail, there were still signs of her being wary or flinching, but it was at a level that could be overlooked.

For Lee Hayul, who completely lacked the social skills to activate a withdrawn Choi Jiyeon, this was a welcome development.

“Junior, did something happen? You don’t look well…”

Just as Lee Hayul was nodding inwardly while observing Choi Jiyeon’s complexion.

Choi Jiyeon, with obvious bewilderment, examined Lee Hayul's complexion and expressed concern in return.

Did something happen?

Just hearing the word "unicorn" being whispered around them was enough to know that something had happened to Lee Hayul.

But Choi Jiyeon was probably asking about Lee Hayul's complexion… why his skin was glowing like milk yet had a gloomy air coexisting.

Why was that…

The corners of Lee Hayul's mouth twitched. A strange sensation lingered on his forehead for no reason.

Homogenization that was implemented in an unexpected direction after touching it out of curiosity.

Something that surged up from within and devoured his reason when he tried to do something about it belatedly.

The memory… no, the delusion he had tried hard to bury slightly raised its head.

The memory continued like a panorama.

Laughing carelessly and clinging, whining and throwing tantrums like a child, snuggling into someone's arms and grabbing recklessly, looking for some cow… such outrageously ill-mannered, childish… vulgar behavior…

The lukewarm gazes of those around him staring blankly…

The urge to hang himself arose.

…

[No]

[I'm fine]

[Nothing happened]

[Nothing]

[Just nothing]

[Really]

"Ah, yes… I understand."

Choi Jiyeon nodded glumly at Lee Hayul's intense denial and face color changing like a traffic light.

It seemed she realized Lee Hayul's inner thoughts, as this topic was not pursued any further.

Lee Hayul was very satisfied with that.

He had been teased mercilessly since this morning.

He never wanted to bring up this memory…

Muttering so gloomily, Lee Hayul took out the thermos he had brought this morning, opened the lid, and tilted it to his mouth.

Pure white milk filled his mouth.

Perhaps because it was cool, it went down his throat easily.

.

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Shio-ram's haphazard education policy was also demonstrated in the mentoring system.

They make the students figure out the matching between seniors and juniors on their own.

They don't even mediate. So students sometimes mediate through communities or gatherings they create separately.

Because of this, 1st and 2nd year students are busy going around exploring for mentors and mentees during this time. That's why the cafe earlier was quite crowded too.

Those who have found partners are probably discussing schedules or already conducting mentoring like us, while those who haven't found partners are still wandering around looking for matches.

First-year students look for outstanding seniors who can teach them well and from whom they can learn a lot.

Second-year students look for juniors who will follow their teachings well and from whom they can also learn something.

They go around roughly looking for partners like that and make nominations.

Once both parties accept the nomination, they are registered as mentor and mentee from that point on.

There's no set education policy. There are no conditions on what to study.

If you want to learn martial arts, you can learn martial arts, if you want to learn magic, you can learn magic.

Other skills like summoning, metallurgy, alchemy, etc. are fine too.

You just study whatever you want to learn and teach.

As long as you diligently write and submit progress and result reports, you get ample credits.

In a way, it was a good system where you could get credits just by attending well.

“You want to study Taesan?”

Lee Hayul wanted to study Taesan.

Taesan is a key ability that will help extend his body and lifespan.

Among those around Lee Hayul, Choi Jiyeon is the only one who has manifested Taesan, and she is also the one who handles it best.

With such a person as his mentoring partner, it would be foolish not to study Taesan.

“Taesan…”

At Lee Hayul’s question, Choi Jiyeon let out a contemplative sigh.

[Would it be rude?]

[I’m not asking for clan secrets or anything]

[I’m just curious about how Taesan is basically operated]

Taesan is a unique ability passed down from the progenitor.

During that time, active research on the unique ability has accumulated a lot of data.

Thanks to this, later generations can easily enter and practice, but information leaks also lead to countermeasures and weaknesses being revealed.

Of course, even if there are weaknesses, the unique abilities of the Three

Great Clans are still overpowered abilities that can only be beaten up… but they wouldn't be pleased about leaks.

"No, no. It's not a problem. It's just…"

Choi Jiyeon shook her head in denial, then glanced down at Lee Hayul.

Choi Jiyeon's eyes looking this way were very complex. A whirlpool of all sorts of emotions and thoughts came to mind.

"…Alright. I understand. Actually, the basic operation methods are all known information anyway."

[Really?]

[Thank you]

Lee Hayul expressed gratitude with a brightened expression. Since the operation of life force would be included in the basic operation methods, he should ask her to demonstrate that.

Seeing Lee Hayul's changed expression, Choi Jiyeon flinched, then added while holding up one finger.

"In exchange, show me your Gop-hwa too."

[Yes]

[Understood]

It was a request within expectations. Since Taesan and Gop-hwa are both unique abilities of the Three Great Clans, it would be beneficial to demonstrate and exchange them.

.

.

.

As the saying goes, strike while the iron is hot. Having made plans, Choi Jiyeon and Lee Hayul rented a nearby training area.

“How much do you know about Taesan, junior?”

Choi Jiyeon asked while tapping the dirt ground with her toes.

They came to an outdoor training ground for a smooth demonstration of Taesan.

Of course, for something like Taesan, being indoors wouldn’t be a problem at all, but they came outside to avoid potentially damaging facilities.

[I’ve heard the basics]

“Then I’ll demonstrate and explain at the same time.”

With those words, Choi Jiyeon’s mana began to move.

The core located near her heart pulsed.

With each pulse, mana with an earthy attribute poured out from the core.

The uniqueness contained within Choi Jiyeon swelled up.

The earth energy that poured out formed a mountain range stretching to the horizon, with peaks soaring high enough to pierce the clouds in the sky.

“Phew… Is this enough for startup? Can you sense it with your detection ability?”

Choi Jiyeon exhaled deeply and spoke while glancing this way.

[Yes]

[I can sense it well]

Lee Hayul nodded. From even before the startup, he had already been thoroughly observing Choi Jiyeon with the Power of Observation.

He was also sharpening his senses and projecting them towards Choi Jiyeon.

Thanks to that, he was able to sense the startup process of Taesan in detail.

“Taesan can be largely divided into three abilities.”

Choi Jiyeon began explaining.

“Physical ability amplification, earth control, and life force manipulation. First, physical ability amplification… is it too common to need explanation? If I had to compare, it’s a bit different in nature from Gop-hwa.”

Choi Jiyeon flicked her finger. Soon, a fist-sized rock popped out from the ground at her feet. Choi Jiyeon picked up the rock and grasped it.

“Taesan’s physical amplification specializes in defense and sustainability. You can take most attacks without a scratch, and even if you get injured, you recover quickly with natural healing power. It also consumes very little mana, so you can maintain it for long periods.”

Crunch… Her fingers dug into the rock as if kneading tofu.

“Gop-hwa’s advantage is instantaneous output. The impact unleashed in an instant is superior with Gop-hwa… Ah, come to think of it, this explanation isn’t necessary for someone who manifested Gop-hwa.”

[I’m listening well to the explanation]

“I appreciate that.”

Choi Jiyeon shrugged her shoulders awkwardly.

“Next is earth manipulation.”

Boom… A mound of dirt suddenly rose up right next to her. That undulating mass, like a slime, gradually took shape.

Short hair tied back, a slender face followed by a curvy body.

It was an earth figure that took on Choi Jiyeon's form.

"This is roughly the ability. An attribute ability that controls what's contained in the earth."

Choi Jiyeon patted the shoulder of the earth figure that mimicked her.

The earth figure, which even implemented clothing, couldn't reproduce colors, but if examined externally, the details mostly matched Choi Jiyeon.

"As an attribute ability, creation is also possible."

She roughly crushed the rock and raised one hand.

Mana condensed there and transformed into fine soil. When she clenched her fist, soil poured out between her fingers.

"Of course, it's usually not permanent and not very efficient. Especially when operating on a large scale, it's better to use the ground."

Earth manipulation.

It's the symbolic ability that first comes to mind when thinking of Taesan.

"Lastly, life force manipulation…"

And finally, the paragraph Lee Hayul wanted came up.

Lee Hayul listened intently to Choi Jiyeon's explanation while focusing his mind even more.

Seeing Lee Hayul's attitude, Choi Jiyeon slightly glanced at him.

“This is difficult to explain. Not because I don’t want to explain it to you, junior, but because there’s no proper way to explain it…”

[I didn’t think that, so don’t worry]

“Yes… thank you.”

At Lee Hayul’s response, Choi Jiyeon replied with an expression that seemed burdened yet also strange.

“Actually, necromancy also relies on life force manipulation. It’s a concept of recognizing life force, using the earth as a medium to control and handle spirits… Hmm…”

Choi Jiyeon fell into contemplation and let out a sigh.

Though she said it was difficult, she seemed to be trying to explain it easily in her own way.

‘She’s teaching really hard.’

Maybe because she’s inherently kind, she’s trying to explain in detail what could be glossed over.

The explanations so far have been really accurate and easy to understand. She also revealed important elements that didn’t need to be told, so Lee Hayul gained some knowledge that would be helpful when operating Taesan.

Still, Lee Hayul was unskilled at handling Taesan.

He can imitate Gop-hwa first, and handle it skillfully after studying all sorts of materials and receiving guidance from the Gop-hwa clan.

For Changhae, though there isn’t much knowledge, he’s handling it by expanding on the experience of receiving one-on-one guidance from Baek Ahrin and the occasional advice she throws out.

If he accumulates a lot of information about Taesan from Choi Jiyeon like this, he'll be able to handle Taesan skillfully someday too.

"Junior, there is one method…"

[What method?]

"Um…"

Choi Jiyeon hesitated somewhere. She seemed to feel guilty about something, then glanced at Lee Hayul and said:

"Well… it's a method of holding hands and infusing mana and life force. This is how I learned in the clan too. Life force is difficult to understand no matter how it's explained until you recognize it once."

'Certainly.'

Lee Hayul also didn't know much about life force until he recognized it with Taesan.

He vaguely felt like something important was disappearing from his body… but he didn't know it was life force.

"Of course, it's a bit danger…"

[Here]

Lee Hayul nodded and held out his hand.

Of course, he can recognize life force now. But it seemed inappropriate to say that right away, so he followed Choi Jiyeon's words.

He planned to observe how life force is operated along the way.

"Uh…"

[?]

Then Choi Jiyeon blinked as if surprised.

Lee Hayul slightly checked his arm. It's a normal arm, not a prosthetic. Why is she acting like that?

Choi Jiyeon looked at Lee Hayul's outstretched hand as if very troubled.

After a moment, Choi Jiyeon opened her mouth with a hardened expression, as if steeling her resolve.

"…Junior, you shouldn't easily hold out your hand to others."

Lee Hayul was suddenly scolded.

[What the hell]

He was dumbfounded. She asked for it herself.

"Interfering with someone else's body with mana is very dangerous."

Perhaps it showed on his expression. Choi Jiyeon hesitated but continued speaking.

"If the accepted mana explodes inside the body, your circuits and core could be mashed up. If you're lucky, you'd be half-paralyzed, and in the worst case, you could die instantly."

[Are you trying to kill me?]

"No? I would never do that, but if someone else…"

[I trust you, senior]

The mouth that had been continuing politely closed tight. Choi Jiyeon's eyes blinked blankly. Her expression showed she hadn't expected to hear such words.

"…What about me do you trust? We haven't known each other for long."

[We fought together in China]

[Good person]

That wasn't all of his inner thoughts.

It's true that he thinks Choi Jiyeon is really a good person based on their actual interactions, but knowledge from the original story was also one of the pieces of evidence.

Of course, there might be cases like Baek Ahrin stabbing him in the back at crucial moments.

He was prepared for such backstabbing cases too.

Also, though it may sound arrogant, even if Choi Jiyeon tried to insert mana into his body and mess with it, he could subdue her in an instant.

As long as he possesses mana affinity, he can overwhelmingly dominate in basic mana control.

Until recently, he was able to demonstrate this to some extent in sparring with his teacher.

Of course, if his teacher brought out Midday Sun and responded seriously, Lee Hayul would be crushed in no time.

Anyway, a small spoonful of that little confidence, a bit of knowledge from the original story, a few spoonfuls of Choi Jiyeon's nature grasped from actual encounters…

That's roughly what he conveyed through the necklace.

"Um… Ahem! Thank you, for trusting me."

Choi Jiyeon, who had been blinking repeatedly, flinched in surprise. Then she glanced at Lee Hayul and cleared her throat before carefully extending her

hand.

“Then… shall we hold hands? I’ll insert external life force and circulate it for you. Try to sharpen your senses and feel it.”

[Okay]

Lee Hayul held hands with Choi Jiyeon.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say Lee Hayul’s hand was held due to the size difference.

Soon, he felt life force entering his body.

* * *

Choi Jiyeon slightly opened her eyes that had been closed. Light entered her previously dark vision.

Soon, a small, pure white child came into view. It was Lee Hayul, holding hands with Choi Jiyeon and trying to recognize life force.

There was no movement. Though he should be twitching a little, he was motionless like a wooden statue except for the rising and falling of his breath.

The process of recognizing life force… honestly speaking, it’s a futile act.

There are virtually no cases where someone recognizes life force just by stuffing mana and life force into their body and stimulating it.

If that worked, she would have gone around making all sorts of people recognize life force.

To begin with, this method is used by the Taesan clan on those who have manifested Taesan.

Because Taesan comes with the basic function of recognizing life force, stimulating for a while allows quick recognition of life force.

For others, it's essentially a useless act.

– Traces of Taesan were found at the epicenter where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon disappeared. It's the testimony of Lee Sun who was dispatched. Considering his ability, it's probably not nonsense.

It's a useless act for others.

– That special admission student… Lee Hayul created the epicenter. Traces of Taesan were found there. Do you understand what this means?

For those who have manifested Taesan… it would be helpful for beginners who have just manifested it.

Choi Jiyeon stared at Lee Hayul with a strange gaze.

– [I trust you, senior]

'……'

Choi Jiyeon's eyes looking at Lee Hayul were tinged with guilt.

She felt guilty for being conscious of Lee Hayul's soft, milky hand…

'No, first the life force…'

Choi Jiyeon shook her head left and right to clear away distracting thoughts. Guilt or whatever, let's first insert a little life force to stimulate the senses.

If he really possesses Taesan, there might be some results.

To insert life force, first recognize Lee Hayul's life force…

……?

'…What, is this.'

Choi Jiyeon's mouth opened blankly. The information felt from the touching hands was strange.

To insert life force into Lee Hayul, she recognized Lee Hayul's life force. Others' life force cannot be easily recognized and interfered with.

So it took a little time, and now she could finally look into it.

'It's gone.'

It's gone. It's completely empty. The primordial energy that life should have is dried up.

No, there's a more appropriate expression.

The life force is depleted to the point of hitting rock bottom.

As if he could die at any moment…

'……'

Choi Jiyeon's face turned pale.

CHAPTER 181
CHILDREN GROW UP FAST (2)

‘So this is how it’s normally done. It’s a little different from mana.’

Lee Hayul sharpened his senses and focused on observing Choi Jiyeon. He paid particular attention to how she manipulated vital energy.

He meticulously gathered data, ensuring not to miss a single detail as he observed and recorded everything.

The way Choi Jiyeon manipulated her vital energy was remarkably smooth.

She drew the energy from the ground, circulating it within her body. As a result, her physical abilities and recovery rate naturally became more active.

Choi Jiyeon already had monstrous physical abilities and recovery speed thanks to the influence of the Taesan Clan.

With her body further enhanced by vital energy, and clad in the armor and Qi of Taesan, Choi Jiyeon was the perfect vanguard, worthy of the title ‘Impenetrable Fortress.’

It wasn’t for nothing that she had survived while buying time against the Twin-headed Venom Dragon (Necromancer), even after taking hits.

In the original story, there wasn’t a single tank as capable as Choi Jiyeon.

‘I’m glad I asked for help. If I had charged in alone, I wouldn’t have made it in time before entering the Tower.’

Lee Hayul marveled inwardly.

The manipulation of vital energy was said to be the most difficult aspect of

the Taesan techniques, yet Choi Jiyeon handled it with ease.

Even from his perspective, this level of control was impossible without exceptional talent and skill.

The basic operations of Taesan he had observed earlier were also impressive.

She manipulated the ground as if it were an extension of her own body.

The numerous necromancers she summoned from the ground moved swiftly and precisely according to her commands, without any sign of disorder.

Despite the complexity of the process, Choi Jiyeon was able to fight without any issue.

It was a combination of natural talent and relentless effort—neither of which could be absent to achieve such mastery.

Her skills were in stark contrast to her usual self-deprecating demeanor.

‘But considering the situation, I can understand why… ’

Though it was only a part of the original story, Lee Hayul could understand why Choi Jiyeon had low self-esteem.

Her two younger siblings, with whom she was close, were hailed as unprecedented geniuses and were expected to be the reincarnation of the progenitor.

Choi Jiyeon, while talented, did not reach the same level. In terms of raw potential, she couldn’t compare to them.

To be precise, the one referred to as the reincarnation of the progenitor in the Taesan Clan wasn’t Choi Jiyeon.

‘At this point, the strongest person among the clan heads was Taesan’s head,

right?'

The 11th head of the Taesan Clan, Choi Jia, who was also Choi Jiyeon's biological mother.

The person praised as the reincarnation of the progenitor was not Choi Jiyeon, but her mother.

Surrounded by her emotionless mother and her two genius siblings, it was no wonder Choi Jiyeon evaluated her own abilities so poorly.

Such evaluations are always relative. No matter how much others praised her, she likely couldn't feel it herself.

'Anyway, I think I can manage it before entering the Tower.'

As he accumulated more knowledge about manipulating vital energy in real-time, it felt like a light bulb was flickering in his mind.

The vast amount of information began to connect, forming new insights.

Soon, what had been a vague idea solidified into certainty.

'I can fix my body.'

That certainty grew within him. It might be difficult, but this was the right method.

'Finally… '

He could escape from this wretched body.

His short, stubby limbs and small frame… It was uncomfortable in countless ways.

Most of all, the way people treated him was just odd!

According to Elia, his mental state had regressed along with his physical

body. While he didn't find that treatment entirely unpleasant… it was still a bit strange.

Regardless, he could restore his body.

Just as he was reveling in that thought—

[?]

His hand was suddenly pulled forward. A rough force yanked his body ahead.

The culprit was none other than Choi Jiyeon, who had been holding his hand.

His body was dragged helplessly.

She urgently pulled him into her arms, hugging him tightly.

The soft, fluffy texture of her clothes brushed against his cheek, and the warmth of her skin beneath them also transmitted through.

His body began to relax…

No, wait, he couldn't let that happen.

Instinctively, he almost let his body go limp, but quickly caught himself and struggled.

[Confusion]

[Surprise]

[What the—]

[Why are you doing this?]

He asked in bewilderment. At first, he tried to resist immediately, but Choi Jiyeon's expression was far from normal.

Her face turned pale, then darkened as if she were about to die. She looked sickly, her complexion shifting between yellow and blue.

She looked like someone on the verge of death.

“J-Just a moment… Just a moment…”

Choi Jiyeon stammered, her words faltering as if it was difficult to speak. Though she was asking for time, her actions didn’t wait for his response.

She wrapped both arms around him. One hand encircled his waist, while the other pressed his head into her chest.

Her body heat increased. Being outside without air conditioning, their bodies pressed together, it felt like the temperature was rising.

‘What is this?’

The situation was sudden… and incredibly awkward.

He debated whether he should forcibly break free when the vital energy in the ground surged violently.

This, too, was caused by Choi Jiyeon.

The vital energy was drawn from the earth, surging up through her legs.

The ground around them cracked like parched soil, and the grass that had taken root turned yellow and wilted.

Choi Jiyeon paid no attention to it.

She urgently gathered the vital energy, circulating it through her body, before slowly transferring it to him.

Despite her apparent urgency, she was incredibly careful in how she transferred the energy.

This process repeated for a while. Choi Jiyeon continued to draw in vital energy and inject it into him.

Realizing that it wasn't a dangerous action, he quietly waited.

"Huff… Huff…"

Eventually, the flow of vital energy stopped. Choi Jiyeon let out a long, blocked breath.

She collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily.

Sweat dripped from the tips of her hair, and her chest expanded and contracted with each deep breath.

[…What just happened?]

"Haah?!"

Buried in her chest, Lee Hayul found the situation increasingly uncomfortable. The breath hitting the top of his head was also ticklish.

He tried to endure it for a while, but eventually asked, causing Choi Jiyeon to flinch in surprise and freeze.

Her grip around him tightened.

He tapped her waist, and only then did she finally look down at him.

Her green eyes blinked. Her previously unfocused gaze now seemed to return to normal.

"Ah…"

Choi Jiyeon stared blankly at him. Then, her gaze swept over his body as if carefully inspecting for any issues.

After a long moment of scrutiny, she finally let out a sigh of relief.

Her reaction was incomprehensible.

[What happened?]

“Ah!”

When she didn’t respond, he poked her waist again with his finger. Choi Jiyeon yelped in surprise.

Honestly, he was the one who wanted to scream. Of course, doing so would likely result in being punished by the Curse of Silence.

The waist poke was effective. Choi Jiyeon, who had been lost in her thoughts, finally focused on him.

[Explain.]

At his brief question, Choi Jiyeon’s eyes trembled.

“Ah, ah? That… Oh! Right! It’s because of the vital energy injection!”

[What?]

Choi Jiyeon, who had been mumbling incoherently, suddenly exclaimed.

[Vital energy injection?]

“Y-Yes! Like I explained before, when you draw in and transfer vital energy, there needs to be physical contact between the body and the target. Especially when transferring vital energy between people, the contact area needs to be large!”

[But you said before that just holding hands would be enough?]

“Uh… I thought about it for a moment and realized that wasn’t sufficient…”

[Then why did you suddenly grab me like that?]

“T-That’s because…”

Choi Jiyeon stammered, her eyes darting around nervously in response to his continued questioning.

‘What on earth?’

She seemed to be hiding something, but he couldn’t figure out what.

There didn’t seem to be any malice, and it looked like she was trying to help him…

He decided to nod for now.

[Alright.]

[But next time, give me a heads-up.]

[You startled me.]

“Y-Yes… I’m sorry for scaring you…”

Choi Jiyeon apologized, her eyes drooping like a scolded puppy.

She let out a small sigh of relief, though there was no escaping his observation.

[…Could you put me down now?]

“Ah…! I’m so sorry…!”

Finally, the awkward position was resolved.

Choi Jiyeon carefully set him down on the ground.

His feet touched the earth.

At that moment, he dispelled the Homogenization: Midday Sun and the

dozens of attack spells he had been preparing.

‘My body feels better.’

After parting ways with Choi Jiyeon, he rented another external training facility with tight security.

He tapped the ground lightly with his toes.

Perhaps due to the extra vital energy Choi Jiyeon had injected, his body felt more comfortable.

‘Does stimulating the body with vital energy mean cramming it in to make it aware? Her method was a bit rough.’

He rubbed his arm with a strange expression.

It felt like he had overeaten, his stomach bloated. He wondered if he had absorbed too much vital energy.

‘And… what was that earlier?’

The question lingered.

If Choi Jiyeon’s excuse was that she was too focused… it seemed too rushed and desperate.

He tilted his head.

Just in case, he had filled himself with enough vital energy, considering the Curse of Short Life.

Choi Jiyeon wasn’t the type to be loose-lipped, but there was no need to complicate things by telling her about the curse.

After all, if he ran out of vital energy, he could die, so he had no choice but to keep replenishing it, even if it felt like pouring water into a bottomless pit.

‘For now… ’

Shaking his head, he sat down on the ground.

This time, he would really give it a try.

He exhaled deeply and focused his mind, activating Taesan.

He had gathered plenty of teaching materials. A brilliant idea had also come to him.

He decided to give it a shot.

‘Homogenization, Taesan.’

First, he activated Taesan and drew in the vital energy from the ground.

He supplied the energy to his body through his contact with the ground.

From here, the real challenge began.

Instead of filling a bottomless pit with water, he reinforced the walls of the vessel, expanding its capacity.

A chilling noise echoed from within his body. His bones twisted, and his muscle fibers stretched. His limbs elongated, as if being pulled.

– Ssssss…

Steam rose from his body.

* * *

Choi Jiyeon sat dazed on the ground, slowly piecing together Lee Hayul’s words and actions.

– My body is fine.

– Now that I think about it, your wounds have healed completely?

Despite claiming to be fine, Lee Hayul had turned into a child.

– If there had been anyone nearby, I wouldn't have been able to self-destruct—

The artifact that revealed his thoughts had mentioned… self-destruction.

– Traces of Taesan were found at the ground zero where the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was annihilated.

A powerful blow strong enough to obliterate the Twin-headed Venom Dragon without a trace.

The unique ability to manipulate vital energy—Taesan…

'Ah.'

Anomalies in his body, self-destruction, dried-up vital energy, and Taesan, the unique ability to control vital energy…

The pieces came together. It was a rough conclusion, but it fit the current situation.

Somehow, he had used Taesan at the same time as Gop-hwa to self-destruct.

Lee Hayul had self-destructed while fighting the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

By some miracle, he had survived, but as a consequence, his vital energy had been drained, leaving him with a terminal condition.

'……'

Choi Jiyeon questioned herself.

Why had Lee Hayul chosen to self-destruct?

Even weakened, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was strong. It couldn't be defeated by ordinary means.

Why had he chosen to self-destruct?

Perhaps he had concluded that he couldn't hold out until reinforcements arrived.

He had taken responsibility and faced the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, but perhaps he realized he couldn't buy enough time.

But why had he fought alone instead of with her…

'…Was it because even the two of us couldn't hold out?'

Because she had been a burden.

Because she had been unreliable and in the way.

Even so, he had sent her away to safety, choosing to face the dragon alone. Overwhelmed, he had self-destructed. Though he had miraculously survived, his body had been damaged, and his lifespan shortened.

While she had fled in fear, he had…

"Ugh…"

Suddenly, a wave of nausea hit her.

Choi Jiyeon bent over, covering her mouth with her hand.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Choi Jiyeon

●●●●○○○○○○ (40▷46/100)

[Heir of Taesan] [A Good Person] [Timid?] [Curiosity]

CHAPTER 182
CHILDREN GROW UP FAST (3)

The ground and my senses connected through the manifested Taesan.

The soil, stones, and minerals below, along with the trees and grass rooted in the earth, all came into my awareness as if they were in the palm of my hand.

I could also sense the vitality contained within them.

'Hmm… '

The perception and manipulation of vitality through Taesan were limited to 'me' and 'the earth.'

It was difficult to perceive and manipulate anything beyond that.

Was this what Choi Jiyeon meant when she said vitality manipulation was a subcategory of earth manipulation?

Elements other than the earth were hard to perceive in terms of vitality, and manipulation was only possible after establishing dominion over the earth.

'In the original story, both Choi Jiyeon and the master of Taesan could interfere with external elements too. It's a drawback that can be overcome with proficiency.'

I gradually controlled the vitality and drew it in. I absorbed the vitality from the surrounding earth and let it flow into my body.

My body began to heat up.

It felt like I had submerged myself in boiling water, and soon, steam started to rise from my body.

‘Not yet… ’

Vitality, life force, energy, essence… It didn’t matter what it was called.

The energy that all living things should possess was slowly seeping into my body.

My body was already full of vitality. It had been sufficiently charged, and Choi Jiyeon had unexpectedly filled it to the brim with even more vitality.

My body trembled as if protesting its limits. A wave of rejection surged, like the nausea one feels when trying to vomit after overeating.

I endured. I held onto the escaping vitality and forced it back inside. I didn’t reject the incoming vitality but forcibly absorbed it.

-Crack…

At some point, the vitality that had been on the verge of bursting rapidly depleted.

Simultaneously, pain coursed through my body. I felt an unsettling twisting from within.

My bones creaked. They twisted and grew. The muscles covering them tore and mended repeatedly.

‘Uh… this hurts more than I thought.’

I grimaced. I had anticipated some pain, but now that I was actually feeling it, it was unpleasant.

I had no choice but to sharpen my focus and endure the pain.

My body was changing. The vitality, which had nowhere else to go, began to cling to the vessel that held it.

The vessel, which had shrunk due to a lack of materials, gradually expanded. My bones, muscles, and body, which had been somewhat lacking, grew rapidly.

The pain intensified.

I tightly closed my eyes and let time pass.

How much time had passed?

“Hoo…”

Suddenly, it became easier to breathe. I consciously exhaled and inhaled. There was no more pain.

Rather than pain, I was filled with a refreshing sensation. The air in my lungs felt almost sweet.

‘It’s done.’

[Joy]

[Euphoria]

A smile crept across my face.

The reflection of myself was different from before.

My overall appearance… My white hair and facial features remained the same, but I looked older, more mature.

I squeezed and tapped my arms. My limbs had grown longer, and I was taller.

I carefully observed myself for any abnormalities. There were none. Nothing had grown strangely.

I had already experienced something akin to a complete transformation before.

Although I had become younger and couldn't measure my physical abilities, I had confirmed that the quality of my mana, circuits, and core had vastly improved.

Now that my body had returned to normal, I could measure my physical abilities during training.

And during the optimization process, my height must have increased. I wonder how much taller I've become.

With a broad smile, I analyzed the information.

…

[Damn it.]

Well, at least I'm back to normal.

I decided to think positively.

I scrunched up my face and pounded the ground.

The earth, which had been drained of vitality and showed signs of desertification, was replenished as I buried it and mixed in fresh soil to restore the area.

I left the external training area and entered the commercial district.

I checked the time briefly. It was too late for lunch. Soon, it would be time for training with my master, so I wouldn't have time to eat.

I reached inside my clothes and pulled out a handful of calorie bars from the subspace I had stored them in.

'I haven't had these in a while.'

I had relied on these a lot at the beginning of the semester.

Even in China, I used to fill my stomach with these, but ever since returning, I had been eating tasteless but decent meals and porridge.

Since the timing was awkward, I tore open the packaging and stuffed the bar into my mouth as I headed toward the training grounds.

I walked on my two legs. While it was convenient to let the spirits carry me around, I wanted to feel my body now that it had returned to normal.

My appearance drew some attention.

It was only natural.

A few days ago… or even just a few hours ago, I had been a small child, but now I had suddenly grown.

Look at those stares. They were no longer looking at me like I was a child. They weren't gazing at me with concern, as if I were a lost kid on the street!

They were just staring at me in awe, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

'Heh.'

I shrugged my shoulders. I was no longer being treated like a child. I walked confidently, chest out.

As if reflecting my mood, the wings of the sky shimmered in the sunlight.

* * *

Atra blinked her eyes absentmindedly, staring at Lee Hayul, who stood right in front of her.

[Ta-da!]

Lee Hayul, who had just arrived, smiled brightly and stretched both hands

upward.

It was as if he were proudly showing off, like a small, white bird spreading its wings wide.

Behind him, his winged robe shimmered softly, making the scene reminiscent of a fairy from a storybook.

There was a stark difference between the Lee Hayul she had seen that morning and the one before her now.

He was still cute and lovable, but he had grown significantly from the childlike appearance he had earlier.

His white hair and the intensity of his mana remained the same, but his apparent age had changed.

If she had to describe it, he had returned to his original physique.

Perhaps he had asked for leniency earlier today because of this transformation.

Atra tried to process the situation in her daze.

Perhaps dissatisfied with her reaction, Lee Hayul suddenly puffed out his cheeks and flapped his wings… no, his arms.

[Complete recovery!]

[I'm not a child anymore!]

His necklace clicked as it projected his voice. Perhaps it was her imagination, but Atra could hear a mix of excitement and anticipation in his usually stoic tone.

[Didn't I tell you?]

[I'd be back soon.]

Ah…

She had spent quite a bit of time with Lee Hayul by now. As his childishness and affection increased, it had become easier to read his thoughts.

If she had to guess, he was complaining that she hadn't believed him when he said he'd be back soon.

Indeed, Atra had been skeptical at the time. He had turned into a child, so how was he supposed to return to normal?

"Yes. I was wrong."

Atra chuckled softly.

It was adorable how he had held in his frustration all this time, only to come running over to complain the moment his body returned to normal.

She hugged him tightly, her emotions spilling over.

While he was boasting about how much he had grown, his still-small frame fit snugly into Atra's embrace.

"I'm sorry for not believing my disciple."

[Hehe.]

Lee Hayul wiggled his lips and buried his face in Atra's chest.

As she gently stroked his head and back, the small knot of frustration he had held onto melted away.

"……"

Atra carefully observed Lee Hayul's expression.

It was summer now. The sun was scorching, and the air was so hot that sweat formed just from standing still.

Even superhumans could feel the heat.

Though they could walk through fire without a scratch, they could still feel the sweltering heat beneath the blazing sun.

Even Atra, a top-tier hero, felt the heat and was sweating.

Especially in the parts of her body she had considered trimming down several times due to their unnecessary size, her body temperature rose, and sweat gathered.

Naturally, this led to some discomfort.

Before, she wouldn't have cared about such things, but ever since getting involved with Lee Hayul, she had been managing it consistently.

She glanced at Lee Hayul with some concern.

…He didn't seem to mind.

Even with his face buried in her chest, he wasn't showing any signs of discomfort. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying it, snuggling even closer.

"Sniff, sniff…"

Atra, who had been secretly sighing in relief, suddenly noticed a sweet scent wafting up from below.

Atra's eyes narrowed.

The scent was coming from Lee Hayul, who was nestled in her arms. For some reason, his body's fragrance was growing more fragrant, and her head began to feel fuzzy for a moment.

"…Ahem."

She quickly pulled herself together before her mind could wander too far.

Atra cleared her throat and dispelled the fleeting inappropriate thoughts.

Then, she gently stroked Lee Hayul's head, fixing his slightly tousled hair.

[Hehe.]

Lee Hayul beamed, his smile as bright as the sun, as he leaned into Atra's touch.

For someone who had just declared that he wasn't a child anymore, his behavior was still very much like that of a spoiled child, making Atra chuckle.

After all, just a few days ago, when he had appeared with a horn on his forehead, he had been the very picture of an innocent child.

– [A Cerberus?]

– Huh, what? What kind of dog?

"Kuhuhu."

Atra stifled a laugh as the memory surfaced. She could still vividly recall Liana's horrified scream.

That memory alone would serve as a great way to keep any drunken troublemakers in check for years to come.

"Now that your body is back to normal, there's no issue with entering the Tower."

[Yes!]

[As long as I finish my adaptation training beforehand, there won't be any problems!]

“There are about two weeks left until the entrance to the Tower. Let’s focus on adaptation and training until then.”

[Okay!]

At the mention of the Tower, Lee Hayul nodded firmly.

Having experienced the limits of his power in China, he was determined to grow as much as possible during this upcoming Tower entry.

‘The theme is contemplation… Fortunately, I won’t have to deal with those stubby-limbed creatures fighting each other.’

The master and disciple shared each other’s warmth for a while.

Even though Lee Hayul’s body had returned to normal, their routine hadn’t changed.

* * *

After finishing the day’s tasks, I returned to the dormitory.

The sun was beginning to set, casting a reddish glow on the ground as I entered the dormitory building.

The others still had classes left, and I planned to train in the dormitory.

I took the elevator and got off at my dormitory floor.

Then, revealing the presence I had been suppressing, I started walking.

–…?…!…!

I sensed a presence. Amidst the flurry of excitement and confusion, I suppressed a chuckle.

I arrived at the door of my dormitory. The presence behind it held its breath.

Finally, I couldn't hold back my laughter and brought my smartwatch to the authentication device.

[Cadet Lee Hayul, authenticated.]

With a chime, the door slid open smoothly into the wall.

"Dad!"

A small, white figure, which had been hiding behind the door, suddenly rushed at me.

As I had anticipated, I gently caught the child who leaped into my arms. Her multicolored wings fluttered wildly.

The face that had been buried in my chest suddenly looked up. Her big, white eyes were filled with question marks.

"…Dad, you've grown!"

[I've returned to my original form.]

The little assailant was none other than Lee Seo-yul.

Her eyes, brimming with joy and surprise, quickly softened as she buried her face back into my chest.

Her enthusiastic welcome made me smile.

"Welcome back, young master."

As I exchanged greetings with Seo-yul, Elia, dressed in a modern maid outfit, gracefully approached from inside.

"…You've really grown quickly."

[Thank you again, Elia.]

“I was merely doing my duty.”

Elia, who rarely showed surprise, widened her eyes slightly when she saw me.

But she soon restored her expression to its usual neutral state and gave me a slight bow.

She was the epitome of professionalism. I expressed my gratitude once more and patted Seo-yul on the back.

[Seo-yul.]

[Have you been listening to Elia?]

“Yes! I ate well, brushed my teeth, and studied hard!”

[You did everything thoroughly.]

[Well done! You’re amazing!]

As I carefully fixed her messy hair and asked, Seo-yul, who had been feeling a bit down, immediately began chattering away like a little bird, reporting her day’s activities.

Of course, I could check everything through the recorded data, but wasn’t the process of listening and talking to each other important?

“And then…!”

[Oh…]

[That must have been tough! How did Seo-yul manage that…?]

As they say, praise can make even a whale dance. Children, in particular, need plenty of praise… or so I’ve learned.

With Seo-yul in my arms, I walked further inside the dormitory. I listened

intently to every word she said and showered her with praise.

'…Hmm… '

Meanwhile, I broke into a cold sweat as I checked Seo-yul's condition.

Her legs, which could now run and jump without any problems…

Her speech, which had become fluent, with no more issues with pronunciation, and her rapidly expanding vocabulary…

'She's growing too fast… '

I observed Seo-yul's rapid growth and wiped the sweat from my brow.

I hadn't even done much for her yet, but she was growing too quickly…

'I wanted to create more childhood memories for her… '

Fairies were said to have short childhoods as it was. There were emotions and joys that could only be experienced during childhood, but her rapid growth was making things difficult.

"Hehe."

Unaware of my concerns, Seo-yul simply smiled brightly, as if she were enjoying the moment.

Her multicolored wings spread wide, intertwining with the deep blue feathers.

* * *

[The curse of 'The Beauty and the Beast' restores your body.]

[You consume vitality.]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●●○○ (87▷88 /100)

[Master] [Expectation] [Stability] [Yearning for Affection]

CHAPTER 183
CHILDREN GROW UP FAST (4)

After spending some time with Seo-yul, I gathered my clothes and underwear and entered the bathroom.

Now, I had somewhat adjusted to the dazzling interior of the bathroom.

It resembled that of a hotel where you would typically spend some money.

A brown carpet was laid on the white, smooth floor, and a long mirror was attached to one wall.

Below it was a well-maintained sink and a shelf neatly arranged with a robe and cosmetics.

I placed the clothes I would change into on the shelf and took off what I was wearing.

Having turned my body around, I proceeded with physical training with my master.

In fact, today's training was somewhat similar to rehabilitation, so it wasn't too intense, but perhaps because I hadn't moved vigorously in a while, I felt a bit creaky.

Thanks to that, the outfit I wore out after rolling on the floor became trash.

Of course, the clothing itself had restoration and cleanliness functions, and I had used purification magic, but since there were many outfits, I tossed it into the laundry basket without hesitation.

Immediately after, I stepped into the glass partition and carefully operated the device.

– Shwaaa…

Warm water poured down from the ceiling-mounted rain shower.

[Worry]

[Concern]

[Trauma]

I didn't let my guard down and reached out my fingertips to check the water's condition.

It was a pleasantly warm temperature. Only then did I push my body in and let the water cascade down from the top of my head.

– Puhuu…

My hair became thoroughly soaked, and water streamed down my body. Soon, the inside of the glass partition was filled with foggy steam.

Buried in the steam and feeling the water stream down, it seemed that the fatigue accumulated throughout the day was somewhat alleviated.

…That said, even now, fatigue was still piling up in one corner of my divided consciousness…

Regardless, I couldn't just stand under the water, so I squeezed some shampoo into my palm.

I rubbed the shampoo I squeezed onto my head and lathered my body with body wash.

– Uuuung…

It was time to rinse off, but a burst of blue light suddenly appeared next to me.

It was a water spirit. Its body flickered briefly. The water that had been pouring straight from the showerhead began to move freely, washing my body thoroughly.

‘Oh… ’

It was very comfortable. Before I could even ask why it had come, I subtly entrusted my body to its convenient assistance.

Thanks to that, removing the foam was quickly finished.

The bathroom was equipped with a large bathtub and bath additives, but since I had no intention of using them right now, I skipped over them.

I planned to use the bathtub together with Seo-yul later. Would she enjoy it if a yellow duck doll floated around while we bathed together?

I left the thought of using the bathtub for another day and stepped out of the partition.

I patted the water spirit that rubbed against me as if to ask, “Did I do well?” and picked up a long towel.

At the same time, just like before, a burst of light appeared.

Light green and red… the spirits of wind and fire.

I waited for a moment with anticipation.

In response to my expectation, a gentle breeze and warm heat wrapped around my body and hair.

[Comfortable…]

I gently lowered the towel I had lifted.

I understood why Professor Liana had warned to be cautious with spirits in

everyday life.

Even while sitting still, they washed me, dried me, and kept me warm, so I didn't feel the need to move on my own.

Could it be that Professor Liana had felt this way too?

I understood why her room was so messy…

At this rate, I felt like I might become a hopeless human.

I comforted the other elemental spirits, who looked gloomy, saying they couldn't do anything, and picked up the towel again.

"Young Master, I will prepare dinner."

After finishing my shower, while rummaging through the kitchen, Ariel, who had been next to Seo-yul, hurriedly approached.

[Ah, thank you for your words.]

[But this time, I want to try making it myself.]

"You, cooking…?"

[Yes.]

[I can cook a little.]

Ariel blinked her eyes. It wasn't outright doubt about my cooking, but there was a hint of concern in her reaction.

[If there's anything wrong while I'm cooking, could you point it out?]

[They said Yoonhwa and Elia would be coming soon, so I want to prepare in advance.]

"Indeed… understood."

But when I added that I would like her help, only then did Ariel nod her head. She seemed eager to help, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

Ariel had over ten years of experience supporting Hong Yoonhwa.

Even if I messed up, she likely thought she could handle it with her superior cooking skills.

I trusted her and asked for her assistance.

Anyway, after making that request, I neatly took out the ingredients and tools.

The menu wasn't anything special.

Just fried rice with bacon and cream pasta… a simple soup and bagels were all.

It might seem like a lot of dishes, but including Seo-yul, there were roughly 4.5 people, and all four were superhumans.

In other words, they would consume much more than ordinary people. Even Elia, who was a support type, could easily finish a bowl of rice.

It could even be considered a small amount, so I planned to make a lot.

Time was not plentiful. I washed my hands clean again and began cooking.

"…?"

A question mark appeared above Ariel's head as she stood next to me.

Her gaze was fixed on the many strands of the sky's wing feathers that split behind me.

With a look as if witnessing something extraordinary, I manipulated the sky's wing feathers.

I extended the split wing feathers to grab the tools and ingredients.

The cooking process continued swiftly. The agile wing feathers washed and trimmed the ingredients.

Some strands placed water in a pot to boil, while one dropped the pasta when the water began to boil.

Another strand spread cooking oil in a heated frying pan and stir-fried the prepared vegetables.

The ingredients for the fried rice and the onions and mushrooms for the mushroom soup were also well stir-fried.

On one side, bagel bread was being cut, stuffed thickly, and topped with the bread lid.

The spirits also intervened in the process. Thanks to that, the cooking process became even more colorful and diverse.

It seemed to be quite a spectacle, as Seo-yul approached me, eyes shining with excitement, watching the scene.

[Seo-yul, it's dangerous if you come too close.]

[Shall we watch from a bit further away?]

"Okay."

[That's right, good girl.]

I gave a small warning to Seo-yul, who was trying to get too close, and continued with the cooking.

All of the above processes were carried out through observation, calculation, and measurement.

The information gathered from casually observing the cooking scenes in the library, aided by the proficiency of a jack of all trades, made the process quite decent.

Honestly, I believe that if you just follow the recipe, you can usually end up with something edible.

Based on that belief, I accurately calculated the intensity of the fire, the quantities of ingredients and spices, and the cooking and boiling times through observation.

"…Do you need help?"

Ariel, who was standing next to me, asked with a hint of reluctance.

Her blunt expression, uncharacteristic of Ariel, made me chuckle awkwardly.

"Wow… what is all this?"

Just at the right moment, the group arrived at the dormitory. It was true that I had started cooking with that intention, but I was fortunate nonetheless.

Hong Yoonhwa, glancing at the dining table, opened her mouth in awe. Her pupils darted back and forth between the dishes, marveling at them.

[How is it?]

A smile crept onto my face at her satisfied reaction.

As I stepped closer behind her, she suddenly turned her head to look at me, her gaze examining the apron I was wearing.

"…Did Hayul do all this?"

"Yes, I wanted to lend a hand, but I turned out to be useless."

Ariel spoke with a somewhat frustrated expression.

I had felt that her emotional expressions had become richer since earlier, and now Hong Yoonhwa's eyes were filled with emotion.

It was very clear to see in her eyes. A warm scent wafted from the food, enough to ease my throbbing headache.

[Hehe.]

I puffed out my chest in a sense of accomplishment.

– Did I really come back? Thank goodness… Yes, this feels good now. The childlike form is nice, but… it felt too guilty. Let's sleep together tonight.

Earlier, at the entrance, Hong Yoonhwa had also hugged me tightly, relieved that I had returned to normal.

– It's a bit disappointing, but you look cute now!

Elia also congratulated me with slightly embarrassing words.

"Huh? You made bagels too?"

[Yes.]

[I heard they eat bagels in England, so I followed a recipe to try it out.]

"Wow! I loved this and ate it every time I went there!"

Elia, who followed in, clapped her hands, already expressing her joy.

Seeing her excited even before tasting it didn't feel unpleasant.

[Hehe.]

With the continuous compliments and admiration, my lips curled into a smile.

"You really have returned to your original self? Congratulations!"

Another voice chimed in.

Baek Ahrin, with her water-colored hair flowing in, widened her eyes and spoke.

[Yes, I just made it.]

[But why did you come, Baek Ahrin?]

I tilted my head, finally asking the question that had puzzled me since I observed when she arrived.

“Wow! Hayul, your words sound so harsh… Can’t we just come to hang out?”

In response to my question, Baek Ahrin replied dramatically.

With an exaggerated sob, she even wiped her eyes as if to dry tears.

Her expression naturally turned sour.

“Hahaha! Look at your expression… I get it. I’ll stop joking. Is it rude if I eat with you?”

Baek Ahrin, who stopped giggling, suddenly asked. At that question, I glanced at the table.

The portions had been intentionally set generously.

One person joining wouldn’t make it insufficient.

[There’s plenty.]

[Let’s eat together.]

“Thank you! I’ll repay you later!”

Baek Ahrin smiled brightly and took my hand.

Of course, even if the portions were insufficient, I would have suggested we eat together, whether I reduced my share or prepared more food.

Above all, I had received so much from Baek Ahrin. Just a few days ago…

– [Does Ahrin not have milk?]

– It will come out later—

[Ugh…]

Suddenly recalling that memory, I held my head and bent over. The people around me jumped in surprise and rushed to me.

They were all parties to that regretful memory.

[Shame]

[Intense Regret]

The surrounding commotion only deepened the ache in my heart…

The dinner table was filled with a warm atmosphere.

The TV in the living room played an entertainment program from who knows when, and the clinking of cutlery echoed on the dining table.

A quick glance revealed the other's preferences for food.

Hong Yoonhwa preferred fried rice.

Even though it was a simple fried rice with vegetables, bacon, and spices, she was enjoying it.

Was the fried rice, adjusted by the fire spirit, something different?

I was curious, but unfortunately, I couldn't taste it.

In contrast, Elia mostly reached for the bagels.

There were two types of bagels made.

One type was cut horizontally, with cream cheese smeared thickly, filled with fresh salmon and tomatoes.

The other type was made by putting mustard on salted beef and sandwiching it between bread… so there were two types in total.

Was the one with beef the so-called London style? Just in case, I had prepared the salmon one too, but fortunately, she was enjoying both types.

In fact, there wasn't much cooking involved; I only adjusted the seasonings and cheese a little.

They say this is how it's commonly eaten in England, and it seemed to suit Elia's taste.

As for Baek Ahrin and Ariel… they seemed to prefer cream pasta.

The cream pasta wasn't particularly special either. I made it by the book and added plenty of bacon.

Ariel declined, saying she would eat separately later, but I insisted we eat together, so we ended up at the same table.

"Wow, this is delicious…"

"Seriously. It's much better than what I bought in London!"

[Hehe.]

Seeing everyone enjoying the meal washed away the anxiety that lingered in my heart.

No matter how much I thought I hadn't failed due to the power of

observation, and that all the food was tastier due to the jack of all trades' enhancement… I still wondered how real people's tastes would react.

But now that anxiety had vanished. Feeling as if my heavy stomach had been cleared, I smiled and mechanically moved my spoon.

"So, Hayul, are you preparing for the entrance exam now?"

While I was busy eating fried rice.

Baek Ahrin, who had been watching me eat with a strange look, suddenly brought up the entrance exam.

[Yes, I've heard the information.]

[But first, I want to adjust to my body returning to normal.]

Instead of my mouth, the necklace answered as I chewed my food.

"Already the entrance exam? Wasn't it starting next week?"

"Yes, yes. Just like last semester, from Monday to Friday for five days."

The time for the entrance exam had already come. Because of that, Professor Liana and my master had also become busy, and even though they invited me for dinner, they couldn't find the time.

The image of my master looking extremely regretful, like shedding tears of blood, and Professor Liana seeming very disappointed still lingered in my mind.

I casually observed the contents of the refrigerator.

'There's plenty of ingredients.'

Fortunately, there were enough ingredients.

I should make some more and deliver it next time.

Speaking of which, I had received sandwiches from Professor Liana at the beginning of the semester.

I could think of this as a return gift.

“Was the observation… a duel against the manifested self? Unlike last time, I won’t be chased by other students.”

“Instead, there will be many other difficulties, so I’ll have to prepare a lot.”

“But the more you prepare, the harder the trials become, which is strange.”

Listening to their conversation, it seemed each of them was thoroughly preparing for their entrance exams.

I was also diligently preparing.

Thanks to that, my head felt a bit tired, but where else could I train while eating or sleeping?

[Seo-yul? Ah~]

“Aw…”

“……”

As I was taking care of Seo-yul while eating, Hong Yoonhwa glanced over at me with her side-eye.

She briefly looked back and forth between her portion of soup and Seo-yul, then slowly brought a spoonful of soup to Seo-yul’s mouth.

It looked quite awkward.

Seo-yul frowned and kept her mouth shut. Despite Hong Yoonhwa’s earnest attempts to show affection, the inexplicable wall Seo-yul had towards her remained firm.

I couldn't help but swallow a sigh that was about to escape.

I was still too far from becoming someone who would be a mother.

Yet, she was somehow getting along well with Elia and Professor Liana…

Today, my worries deepened.

Ignoring the throbbing headache, I blew on the soup and fed it to Seo-yul.

* * *

The devastating defeat suffered at the hands of Lee Hayul in the tournament.

Not only was I utterly crushed without being able to touch him, but also, the expansion ability I had worked hard to achieve was shockingly deciphered and copied in an instant.

Honestly, it would be a lie to say I wasn't feeling empty.

When I was teased about my defeat at the beginning of the semester, it was a different story, but now, my peers genuinely worried about me.

Just thinking about how that prickly Atila was acting kindly made me worry about how much Aiden must have felt disheartened.

But Aiden quickly shook it off.

Hadn't he already acknowledged that the special admission student had a potential level different from his own?

In fact, it felt a bit late to despair now.

It was true that I was shocked and disheartened, but looking back, we were never on the same comparative level in the first place.

In fact, the duel that took place at the beginning of the semester was the only moment Aiden could have won.

He had even been called a sage in jest. Now, the gap with Lee Hayul had widened too much.

Thanks to that mindset, Aiden could quietly visit the training ground from the day after the tournament defeat, grumbling about the gap in talent.

It was around the end of the vacation that Aiden discovered something strange.

– Pervong!

– Quagagagah!

The training facility he frequently visited.

After finishing training and passing through the first floor with a cold towel around his neck, he tilted his head at the sound of explosions.

“What the heck is that?”

He approached the door where the explosions were coming from. He peered through the small window just above his head.

But due to the security devices, he couldn’t see inside at all.

All he could hear was the faint sound of explosions.

It wasn’t particularly strange. Since it was a training facility, there were times when explosions occurred during training.

Especially since attack magic tends to be loud, it was plausible that he could hear it faintly.

– Quagagah!

“…How long are they going to keep this up?”

There was something odd.

Since the end of the vacation, the training room had been lit up.

Aiden, who arrived early in the morning, thought someone was using it… and just passed by.

Then, when he staggered out late at night after the sun had set, he was surprised to see the training room still lit up.

The next morning, the light was still on.

Even at night, the lights were still on.

…Even when he arrived at dawn, after the day and night had flipped, the lights were still on.

Curiosity piqued, he watched for a while, but no one entered or exited.

It seemed like someone had taken a lease on that place, as the lights were always on.

He had just let it go.

After all, it was vacation; someone might be holed up doing something like closed-door training.

He simply admired that kind of will and resolved to work harder himself.

– Pervong!

Another faint explosion echoed.

It didn't come from the front.

Aiden turned his head with a frown.

The training room across from him was also lit up, and faint explosions could be heard.

– Quagah!

And the one next to it.

– Quazazajak!

And the one in front of it…

There were no people entering or exiting, but the lights were always on, and faint noises were emanating from the strange rooms, which had now multiplied to six.

He had no idea what was going on.

In fact, strange phenomena had frequently appeared in the community lately.

Books suddenly falling by themselves in an empty library, or weapons that had been quietly placed rattling on their own…

I thought it might be a malfunction, so I inquired with the Shio-ram administration, but they only replied that everything was functioning normally.

"…I don't know."

Aiden gave up thinking.

It was possible for six students to be holed up doing closed-door training together.

What, could it be ghosts… or spectral monsters sneaking in to train?

Aiden dragged his tired body back to the dormitory.

CHAPTER 184
THE SECOND TIME

Time passed, and the first day of the second semester's entrance into the Tower of Growth arrived.

Whether they were cadets, residents, faculty, or professors, everyone had their hands full.

Previously, it was the preparation that made Shio-ram so bustling, and today, it was the upcoming entrance schedule that filled the air with excitement.

"What's going on? Why are the second-years gathering at the plaza?"

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had hugged me tightly before falling asleep last night, looked around and asked.

As she said, there were many second-year cadets heading towards the plaza.

"This time, it's not a competition, so the first and second years are entering together. Next week, the third and fourth years will go in."

"Ah, I see…"

Baek Ahrin, who was walking with us towards the plaza, responded. Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been nodding along casually, suddenly frowned and glared at Baek Ahrin.

Ever since that day… The day I treated Baek Ahrin to dinner.

Baek Ahrin had been visiting more frequently, often staying for dinner.

I'm not sure why. Maybe she just wanted to eat with Hong Yeon-hwa.

I had no particular reason to turn her away, so I made dinner without any complaints.

Yesterday was the same. She showed up subtly, sat at the table, and naturally joined us for dinner.

But even after the meal, she didn't leave and stayed over.

Despite Hong Yeon-hwa's pointed looks, asking when she would go home, Baek Ahrin stubbornly stayed.

She even took over one of the rooms, spending the night as if nothing was wrong.

Thanks to that, we were all heading to the dorm together without needing to meet separately.

'…I hope no strange rumors start.'

I scratched my cheek as I recalled the looks we received in the lobby.

When we descended with Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, and Elia, I could feel the peculiar stares directed at us.

Of course, we hadn't done anything suspicious, but rumors don't always care about the truth.

Still, I wasn't too worried.

If anyone dared to spread rumors, a letter with the seals of Gop-hwa and Changhae would be delivered to their home in no time.

With that in mind, I boarded the bus without much concern.

The Shio-ram central plaza was packed with people for the first time in a while.

Was it the first gathering in half a year? Time sure flies. It felt like just yesterday that the first semester's entrance into the tower had ended.

Feeling a strange sense of nostalgia, I stepped into the central plaza.

And there, I observed the ivory-colored tower that stood tall in the center.

Even now, it was radiating the blessing of growth, aiding my rapid development. Soon, it would challenge me again, helping me grow further.

'……'

I briefly activated my observation.

It was much more familiar now compared to before. If I focused, I might be able to delve a little deeper.

…But I didn't push it. I hadn't forgotten the time I almost bled out and fainted while trying to uncover one of its secrets.

I didn't want to risk losing my chance to enter the tower by getting too cocky here.

'Maybe I should consult the vice principal after this entrance.'

The atmosphere was just as chaotic as it had been in the first semester.

Cadets were arriving in droves, gathering by class under the guidance of their professors.

With the second years joining in, it was even more crowded than before.

'Senior Choi Jiyeon is here too.'

She was among a group of cadets who seemed to be her friends.

It looked like she was well-liked, as many cadets were approaching her. Occasionally, I saw her playfully comforting a nervous friend.

Compared to the timid state she was in last time, she seemed like a completely different person.

I still didn't understand why someone like her acted so shy around me.

Anyway, we headed straight to where Professor Liana was guiding the Ipchun class.

Having gone through this once before, we gathered smoothly, even without the large hologram above Professor Liana's head.

"Lee Hayul! Long time no see!"

[It's good to see you too, Julia.]

As I joined the Ipchun class crowd, I was warmly greeted by those who had arrived earlier.

Most of my messenger notifications were still filled with messages asking if I was okay.

It felt strange, as if it was proof that I was a troublemaker, but since they were concerned, I made sure to reply to each one, though it was a bit tiring.

Still, I think it means I've built a good reputation. Though, most of them probably just want to stay connected to me.

"I'm glad there's no competition in this entrance. The thought of competing with you, Lee Hayul… Ugh."

"Compete? I don't think I could even call it a competition anymore…"

"That's exactly why I said it."

The one who sighed in relief was Lorraine, a cadet from a secondary major.

He had distinctive light purple hair… He was a cadet I met during the first

semester's entrance into the tower.

What was it again? When we first met, he and two others ganged up on me using the 'Three Against One' strategy, only to have his head sliced off.

After chatting with the Ipchun class cadets for a while, I approached Professor Liana.

Thanks to the cadets, who now knew what to do, Professor Liana had some room to breathe. Standing quietly next to her was my master, with his arms crossed.

As I approached, both Professor Liana and my master greeted me warmly.

"Oh, right."

[Yes? Hmm? Hmggg…]

It was then. Professor Liana, who had been smiling and patting my head, suddenly narrowed her eyes and pinched my nose.

[Why…?]

It didn't hurt, but I was confused.

When I asked, Professor Liana chuckled and said,

"This is punishment for teasing a professor last time."

[Huh…]

Teasing a professor?

I didn't…

…Oh, I did do something.

Thinking about it, I did quite a lot.

It was karma, after all. Resigned, I let her pinch my nose for a while.

“Do well in there.”

“You’ll do fine, but make sure to learn a lot.”

Unfortunately, it was almost time to enter, so we couldn’t chat for long.

After she finished pinching my nose, she gently patted my hair, and I returned to my spot.

“…Hmm.”

[Ughhh…]

In that short time, Hong Yeon-hwa had become sulky and grabbed my cheek.

This time, I had no idea why she was doing it, but I had to endure her squeezing my cheek.

That unfair treatment only ended when the professor stepped onto the podium to announce the instructions.

“I will now explain the details of this second semester’s entrance into the Tower of Growth.”

The one in charge of the announcement was the same as in the first semester, Professor Albert Kaniazel of the Gogu class.

It seemed that, as the oldest and most experienced, he was in charge of leading these events.

“The theme of this entrance is introspection. The goal is to overcome the version of yourself that will be manifested inside the tower.”

Overcoming yourself… It’s not an easy task. Even fighting a battle of willpower is tough.

But here, you would be fighting a replica of yourself, with all your abilities and techniques. It wouldn't be easy.

"The opponent you face will be based on your abilities at the time of entering the tower."

There was some comfort in that. The version of yourself inside the tower would only reflect your abilities at the time of entry. Any growth you achieved inside the tower wouldn't be reflected.

In other words, as long as you grow while inside, it's not impossible to defeat your manifested self.

Moreover, the blessing of growth is amplified inside the tower, so if you keep pushing, your real self will eventually win.

Considering the conditions, it wasn't an insanely difficult challenge.

"The entrance will last for five days. Once a cadet overcomes their manifested self, they will either move to a separate training room or, upon request, face a special enemy for mock combat."

If you have time left after defeating your manifested self, you can either train more to maximize the amplified blessing or face other enemies in mock combat.

'I should try it if I have time.'

Though the conditions weren't impossible, they weren't easy either. Many cadets barely make it through with little time remaining.

I might find myself barely passing or even getting kicked out.

Of course, since the blessing of growth applies more strongly to me than others, I should pass without too much trouble.

"That concludes the explanation of this entrance. Everyone, take this

opportunity to reflect on yourselves, identify your strengths and weaknesses, and move forward. Now, the Ipchun class will begin entering."

With a simple explanation, Professor Albert of the Gogu class led the entrance without delay.

The arch-shaped entrance at the base of the Tower of Growth.

Cadets lined up and entered the black, swirling entrance without pause.

In the first semester, we entered with a time gap to avoid immediate combat upon entry.

But this time, since each cadet would be in a separate space, there was no delay in entering.

Last time, the Gogu class entered first, but this time, the Ipchun class was leading.

"Hayul, do your best."

"Come back even stronger!"

"I'll see you in the training room if I finish early!"

[Thank you! I'll be rooting for you too!]

Thanks to the smooth process, I was able to stand in front of the Tower of Growth without much waiting.

I smiled and waved at the cheers from behind, then quickly stepped into the entrance so the cadets behind me wouldn't have to wait.

It was my second time entering the tower.

As my consciousness blurred, it suddenly sharpened again.

The dulled sensations became keen.

A dry wind brushed against my body. The sound of my clothes flapping echoed in my ears.

I immediately checked my condition.

‘No issues with my body. Core and circuits are functioning normally. I’ve entered successfully.’

There was a slight sense of unfamiliarity, but nothing uncomfortable.

I clenched my right hand tightly. No problems there, either.

My left arm, the prosthetic, was fine, and I had the Wings of the Sky with me as well. If this were the first semester, they would have been confiscated, but since this wasn’t a competition, there were no restrictions.

After all, if the original body brings artifacts, the replica will also have them.

The air was dry. Feeling my lips gradually drying out, I tapped the ground with my toes and felt the hard surface beneath. It wasn’t grass or soil but something solid.

‘Activate power, observation.’

I reactivated the power I had temporarily set aside. A sharp sensation buzzed in my head.

It felt like I was supporting something.

A repulsive force. The space was pressing down on my observational range.

In the previous entrance, I couldn’t overcome this, so my spatial perception was suppressed, forcing me to act like a blind man.

But not this time.

I effortlessly shook off the pressure, and my observation expanded.

Information about the area around me flooded in, and the darkened map refreshed.

I was standing in a wasteland. The horizon was a dull brown, with hardly any green in sight. The ground was cracked and dry.

'Is this the default setting? I heard it changes depending on the cadet… '

I stroked my chin.

This place wasn't full of life. I could squeeze some out of the earth if I tried, but it wasn't like being in the middle of a lush forest.

In other words, it wasn't an ideal environment for elemental spirits to thrive.

The earth elementals would do well here. And with the wind blowing steadily, it wasn't a bad environment for wind elementals either.

But for the other elementals, it wasn't a friendly place.

'Hmm… '

I stood still for a moment, preparing myself. I laid down several defensive spells and activated basic body reinforcement techniques.

Even though it wasn't an ideal environment for spirits, I still released a bunch of them for surveillance.

At the same time, I thought about how to deal with the 'me' that would soon appear.

'First… '

The abilities I had were Jack of All Trades and Mana Affinity.

Based on those, I had mastered body reinforcement and Qi techniques. I had trained in various martial arts and weapon skills to a high level.

I had memorized countless spells from observing magic books.

I had learned necromancy in a haphazard manner.

I could freely command hundreds of spirits from five different elements, and if necessary, I could even transform into a spirit myself.

With the Ever-changing Swordsmanship, I could replicate techniques and even unique abilities through Homogenization…

Gop-hwa, Changhae, Taesan, Midday Sun, Illusionary Dream, Thorn, Body Amplification, Hardening, Radius, Force Accumulation, and more.

Thanks to the Power of Observation, I had no blind spots, and my movements were precise.

With the Power of Space, I had an arsenal of tools stored in a subspace, along with the ability to create spatial barriers and other applications.

I also had the Proof of Protection, which provided durability enhancements and a protective power that blocked most attacks…

'This is going to be a pain… '

I frowned.

It was going to be tricky to deal with.

There were just too many options.

Even if I came up with a counter, I could just switch to a different technique.

A counter for everything? That's impossible. The only way to deal with such a wide range of abilities is to overwhelm them with sheer force before they can react.

Or completely cut off their mana supply. But then, the Ever-changing

Swordsmanship would kick in, mimicking techniques that don't use mana.

Would the powers even be replicated?

The Power of Protection would probably be there, but I wasn't sure about Space and Observation.

'…I'll just have to dive in and see.'

There was no point in overthinking it. Most of the time, plans fall apart in the field anyway.

I'll experience it firsthand and come up with a counter then.

That's what the revival function is for, right?

It was then that my observation caught a living being at the edge of its range.

'Is it here…?'

I was about to react when I froze. The information flooding my mind… I examined it closely.

The figure was tall. Nearly 2 meters in height, with a rugged build despite the tattered appearance.

The man was wearing what could barely be called armor.

His helmet was long gone, leaving his head exposed.

The armor covering his body was reduced to fragments.

The black robe underneath was ragged and torn.

His arms were wrapped in blood-red bandages.

In one hand, he held a sword, dragging it along the ground. The sword was in terrible condition, looking more like scrap metal.

The black blade was chipped and worn, resembling a piece of junk. Even a scrapyard might not accept it in such a poor state.

‘……’

My thoughts, which had been flowing smoothly, came to a halt.

I wasn’t sure if the conclusions I was drawing were correct.

The armor, reduced to fragments… Jincheol Armor.

A high-grade artifact. It didn’t offer great defense, but it had excellent regenerative capabilities and could block a single attack.

The tattered black robe… Black Wind Robe.

A high-grade artifact. It boosted agility and had a useful mana storage and release function.

The blood-red bandages… Bloodseal Bands. A mid-grade artifact. It absorbed blood to prevent bleeding and status ailments, and extended in length as it absorbed more blood.

The sword dragging along the ground… A mass-produced black iron sword with no special features.

It was a unique combination of equipment.

And it was eerily familiar.

‘No way…’

The man, who had been hanging his head, slowly lifted it.

His face was covered in scars, making him look like a walking corpse.

For a moment, I stopped breathing.

It was different, yet strangely familiar.

‘My face?’

Of course, it resembled mine. I observe my own face every day.

In that instant, the man’s hollow eyes, which had been staring blankly, suddenly contracted.

In the pitch-black depths of his eyes, my distant figure was reflected.

Instinct, or perhaps survival instinct, kicked in.

I moved immediately.

At the same time, the man slightly flicked his sword. The blade, which had been lazily dragging along, suddenly blurred as if enveloped in mist.

‘Oh, shi—’

I couldn’t even finish the curse.

– Swish.

The danger signal was cut off.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Harvest of the White Wings at the End of the Grain Season

Before I could react, my head was severed, flying through the air.

* * *

[The power [Growth] is activating.]

[The trial of growth is commencing.]

[The power [Knowledge] is activating.]

[The power [Observation] is activating.]

[Accessing [Second] record from the Observation System within the Tower of Knowledge.]

[The power [Harmony] is activating.]

[Connecting the Tower of Knowledge and the Tower of Growth.]

[The power [Space] is activating.]

[Accessing [Second] record from the Observation System within the Tower of Knowledge.]

…

[Replicating the recorded entity.]

[Incomplete replication.]

[Second Iteration.]

[Combat Aptitude Asura.]

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CHAPTER 185
SECOND ROUND (1)

[HP has reached 0.]

[The player has died.]

[Bad End 4 – Death in the「Deepest Part of the Demonic Realm」.]

[Calculating data.]

[Round: 2nd Round]

[Selected Setting: Combat Aptitude]

[System Title: Combat Aptitude Asura]

[Cause of Death: 2nd Rank Alpha Monster 'Kaeropt']

"Gyaaaah…!"

I couldn't accept the reality.

My hands and feet trembled uncontrollably, and my vision shook, making the letters on the monitor blur.

I flailed my arms, but there was no way to vent this emotion, so I grabbed my head tightly.

"Ouch, it hurts…"

I immediately let go. I had squeezed too hard, and tears welled up in my eyes. I rubbed my head with my palm and stared at the monitor.

The screen still showed the obituary for the 2nd round.

I pouted my lips for no reason.

The second round of Savior.

It was a round cultivated based on the mistakes and experiences of the first round.

The first round with a vanilla mindset had failed miserably, and in the second round, I set a unique ability through character settings without any complaints.

The unique ability [Combat Aptitude].

It was a technical-type ability.

Its effect was simple: an increase in learning ability and correction in combat actions.

Very simple, and easy to use because of that.

I just had to roll around like a dog.

If I used swordsmanship, my skill would improve, and proficiency in other weapon arts would rise as well.

Since the ability was focused on combat, my overall combat skills increased too.

In short, Combat Aptitude was a unique ability designed solely for combat.

Thanks to that, unlike the first round, I could make an impact even in the early stages.

Of course, I still failed miserably in the first semester's tower entry.

What was wrong with Hong Yeon-hwa? Why did she torment the player so

much? I still couldn't understand why she was so eager to harass a player who was minding their own business.

In contrast, Baek Ahrin was so different.

Even when my reputation was bad, she approached me first, acted friendly, offered help when needed, and even comforted me when my mental state was a mess in the first round.

She was such a kind person.

Not to mention her abilities were outstanding in every aspect, and I can't count how much help I received from her in the first round. Her illustration was also top-tier.

Of course, Hong Yeon-hwa also helped in the first round, but…

"Sigh… Ugh, cough!"

I choked and coughed violently.

Shaking my head, I moved the mouse.

'The second round is a failure too… '

In the end, the second round also ended in death.

What was shocking was that the second round, which was far stronger than the first, ended without even seeing the Tower Master.

The cause of death? I was surrounded by the army of a 2nd Rank Alpha Monster and beaten to death over several days…

"Damn it."

The 2nd Rank Alpha Monster was indeed strong. The matchup wasn't favorable, and my attacks didn't land well, but it wasn't a situation where I

should have died so helplessly.

However, the weakness was clear, and I failed miserably.

‘Too focused on one-on-one combat.’

The Combat Aptitude had evolved into Manjong Martial Arts. From it, hundreds of technical expansion abilities were derived.

In one-on-one combat, it was overwhelming. I could easily take down even top-tier heroes who flaunted their status.

But it had no aptitude for large-scale or army battles. The firepower was insufficient to effectively break through large monsters and their armies.

In short, its limitations were clear.

Moreover, I had focused too much on developing skills, neglecting my base stats.

As a result, the second round was a clear failure with evident limitations.

Of course, it wasn’t a completely useless round. The information from the second round would be passed on to the third round.

“Tsk tsk.”

I felt thirsty.

I should grab something to drink and start setting up the third round.

Clicking my tongue, I manipulated the stick attached to the armrest of my wheelchair.

Memories from the past flashed through my mind.

I remembered clicking my tongue, calling the second round a round with clear limitations.

Back then, I was in a rather unstable period.

I had lost a leg, and reporters or whatever kept pestering me, even coming to my boarding house. I eventually moved, but there wasn't much I could do.

In that state of wandering, I stumbled upon a game called Savior.

It seemed to suit my taste, so I delved into it deeply, trying to forget everything else.

– Grrrk…

And now, I had almost died to the second round.

A sudden burning sensation in my neck brought me back to my senses.

The first thing I became aware of was… the pain in my neck.

'Why… does it hurt?'

In the Tower of Growth, pain is restricted. Even if you're stabbed or cut, it only feels slightly numb.

But this wasn't just a slight numbness.

It was a sharp, cold sensation cutting through my skin and muscles, reaching my neck bone.

The burning pain from the severed flesh…

It all felt real.

I recalled the memory just before.

The unique ability had expanded explosively. At the same time, I had observed the image of my severed neck in my mind.

A white slash flew at me at lightning speed.

Just before it hit, I barely twisted my body and neck, and the slash grazed my neck.

The result was a half-severed, dangling neck.

The cut was so clean that it was almost impressive, and blood spurted out in a torrent.

Splaash! Bright red blood poured onto the barren ground. The earth, perhaps too dry, greedily soaked it up.

– Grrrk…!

Blood foamed in my mouth. I grimaced and wrapped the Wings of the Sky around my neck.

I somehow managed to reconnect the severed area and mimicked Elia's [Healing Melody] through Homogenization for emergency treatment.

A white glow settled on my neck. Without considering the future, I recklessly boosted my regeneration.

'This… damn…!'

If I had been a little slower, if I hadn't set up the barrier, if I hadn't had the durability boost from the Proof of Protection…

If the cut had gone a little deeper, I would have died.

The life signal that had been cut off returned, and the crisis alarm belatedly blared in my ears.

My returning senses were filled with confusion. There were too many strange and baffling things.

The enemy didn't wait for me to regain my composure.

The man standing far away… the figure of the second round blurred.

His movements distorted even the information from my observation. It was probably a technical expansion ability.

But he couldn't completely escape my observation. I could still track his movements. And if I could track him, I could respond.

I measured where the second round would appear and swung my Qi-covered left arm.

Immediately, the second round appeared like a ghost and thrust his sword at me.

Qi wrapped around the blade, tracing a crimson arc.

– Clang!

The sword struck my left arm. In an instant, dozens of slashes tore through my sleeve and arm guard.

There was no serious damage. Beneath the shredded fabric wasn't a wounded arm but a sturdy, white prosthetic.

It was a top-tier artifact specialized in durability. Even the second round couldn't break it easily.

In other words, I could use my left arm as a shield.

I kept my left hand for defense, thickening the Qi around it, intercepting the observed attacks before they reached me.

My right hand was for offense. I grabbed a spear from the subspace and prepared to attack…

But I couldn't.

I had to focus on defense just to survive.

I kept moving.

I dodged attacks I could avoid, deflected those I couldn't with my left hand, and blocked the rest.

Any attack that broke through was countered with the spear in my right hand.

Whenever I felt overwhelmed, I unleashed a barrage of elemental spirit attacks and magic to buy time.

Even with all that, wounds continued to pile up.

I was clearly observing his movements, but interpreting them was difficult. Even when I did manage to interpret them, my responses were slow. The second round always acted first.

His pitch-black eyes never stopped moving. They scanned the world, all directions, and my movements, never missing a thing.

Despite only relying on his two eyes to see the world, it felt like he was seeing far more than I could.

Moreover, his solid foundation, his deep response abilities, the combat logic driving his actions, and his instincts that fired before thought…

In almost every aspect of combat, I was being outmatched.

'Damn it.'

Suddenly, the slashes, which had been cutting fiercely, twisted into an unnatural trajectory.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Snake Tail Overcoming Wall

Startled by the bizarre phenomenon, I twisted my body. The whip-like slash aimed for my neck. I abandoned my attack and blocked it with the spear shaft.

The attack wasn't over. The slash rebounded, violently changing its trajectory to bypass my defense.

Twenty-four slashes curved towards me.

I dodged eighteen and deflected five.

One grazed my shoulder.

Splaash! Blood spurted out again. A sharp pain shot through me as my legs dragged across the ground, pushing me back.

Before the wound could worsen, I wrapped it with the Wings of the Sky to stop the bleeding and prepared to respond…

– Boom!

Before I could attack, another sword strike came flying at me. It was a powerful two-handed swing.

It wasn't particularly fast, but for some reason, I couldn't dodge it.

I hurriedly blocked it with my left arm.

The impact pushed me back again. It wasn't a huge shock, but my left arm trembled. My fingers twitched uncontrollably.

The Qi hadn't broken. But the strange vibrations from the blow spread through my left arm and rippled through my entire body.

'Ah, damn it, this is… '

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Resonance Strike

Boom! The vibrations exploded. The resonance detonated inside my body, causing me to stagger violently. Blood foam burst from my mouth, and a torrent of blood gushed out.

– Grrrk…!

In that brief moment, another expansion ability struck.

'This is dangerous… '

At that moment, the sword in the second round's hand shattered.

There was a brief pause in the attack. During that time, the second round discarded the broken sword and reached into the air.

Ripples formed in the space. Subspace… no, the form was different.

'Inventory!'

The player's privilege that I couldn't use! Why could that bastard use it so freely?

I couldn't let him grab a weapon. Enduring the pain, I activated the Power of Space. Ripples spread out from me.

'Space Domination, Control, and Interference.'

The second round quickly withdrew his hand from the ripple.

Crack! I was a moment too late, and the subspace closed.

If I had been quicker, I could have severed his wrist. Swallowing my regret, I advanced.

I activated the reinforcement technique in my body, now brimming with mana.

Boom! My legs dug into the ground as I propelled myself forward.

Gripping the spear tightly, I swung it. The blade traced a crescent moon as it flew towards the second round. He calmly reached out towards the spear.

The Power of Observation read the signs. The second round's unique ability expanded.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Flowing Cloud…

Another expansion ability. I analyzed it. It wasn't for offense. A defensive technique?

I gripped the spear shaft tightly.

Either way, I could expand too.

I had the data.

I wasn't proficient at it, but I could replicate it well enough.

The rest could be compensated with my accumulated basic abilities.

For the first time, the second round reacted.

He widened his eyes slightly and flicked his hand.

Jack of All Trades Expansion Ability

Ever-changing Swordsmanship – Snake Tail Overcoming Wall

The spear tip traced an unusual path, piercing through his defense and aiming for the second round's neck.

CHAPTER 186
SECOND ROUND (2)

A technique witnessed for the first time. There's nothing that can't be mimicked.

A Jack of All Trades, a unique ability in the technical branch.

The Ever-changing Swordsmanship, an expansion ability specialized in mimicry.

With just this, imitation is possible, but what truly gives wings to it is the Power of Observation.

Since the moment I encountered the second round, I've been collecting information without rest.

The movement of the pupils, the shift of the ankles, the transfer of weight as the feet press the ground, the motion of the shoulders, the rotation of the wrists, and the subtle twitch of the fingers.

I analyze the bundles of muscles moving inside the body, the twisting of the skeleton, and gather all sorts of information to predict the next move and respond.

Even so, the fact that I'm being pushed back one-sidedly is absurd…

In short, the information necessary to form the expansion ability has been more than sufficiently acquired.

Jack of All Trades Expansion Ability

Ever-changing Swordsmanship – Snake Tail Overcoming Wall

The spear traced an unusual trajectory. The spear, which had been thrust in a straight line, moved dynamically, like a snake slithering across the ground.

A movement that defies the laws of physics head-on.

Just before the spearhead pierced the nape of the second round, it was effortlessly caught by the second round's hand. As expected, I still can't stand up to the original.

-Ka-ga-ga-ga-gak!

White and red Qi clashed fiercely against each other.

The aftermath tore up the ground and sliced the air.

Kwa-duk! The balance of Qi collapsed. The second round's grip was torn apart. White Qi pushed back the red Qi.

'The power of my Qi is superior.'

The second round isn't one with high specs. Even with the blessing of growth, it can't compare to rounds where specs were raised using all sorts of tricks and secret methods.

In other words, its physical abilities are inferior, and so is the amount and quality of its mana.

Especially now, when my specs are rising smoothly, it's different.

More than anything, the specs of the second round are strange. Even though it was defeated, the second round was able to stand against the second hierarchy, and yet it's able to engage in combat with me.

The second round twisted its wrist, deflecting the attack. As I followed up, both hands of the second round left afterimages, moving like lightning.

-Kwak!

The second round displayed exquisite hand movements, easily breaking through my defense and grabbing my left wrist.

The arm that was caught was pulled. My body lifted off the ground from an unknown force.

The second round immediately stretched out its other hand, twisting its body.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Raging Current Muscle Extraction

-Du-du-du-duk!

My body twisted, pivoting on the left arm that was caught. If this continues, my entire body will twist like a pretzel, and my bones will be pulled out.

Kwaak! In an instant, the second round's grip grasped at empty air.

The Proof of Protection that was originally caught disintegrated. The white body vanished in a halo of light, and the golden circuit left in the air was reabsorbed into my shoulder as if rewinding.

I aimed for the brief disruption in its movements.

Using the rotation forced on my body, I swung the spear I was holding.

The second round withdrew without hesitation. Of course, there's no reason to take the hit, so it dodged.

'Power manifestation, Space.'

Woo-woong! The second round's body suddenly halted. Then, as if two opposing magnets were pulling at each other, it was dragged toward me.

The spear shaft, which surged forward, struck the second round's forearm.

Jack of All Trades Expansion Ability

Resonance Strike

Bang! A massive vibration erupted. I gathered all the vibrations and forced them into the second round's body. The second round's arm swelled grotesquely.

Even in the midst of this, the second round's body trembled without even blinking an eye.

Just before the resonance explosion, the second round stomped the ground.

Kwa-du-deuk! The ground it stomped on collapsed. The second round's leg flashed as it channeled the shock into the ground, turning it into dust.

-Bang!

'Agh… '

For a moment, my head spun. The spear shattered into pieces as a foot slammed into my jaw.

'Damn it, is this also an expansion ability…?'

I held onto my consciousness, which was trying to drift away. I steadied my body, which had been sent flying backward, and twisted while retrieving the Proof of Protection I had stored.

'Intermediate magic, Wind Blade.'

Magic manifested from behind. Countless sharp slashes, forged by gathering the surrounding wind, were fired.

The waiting elemental spirit responded to the slashes.

The wind spirit enhanced the power of the slashes and guided them toward

the target.

‘Mana Slash.’

Parallel incantation.

Mana slashes, forged purely from mana, were fired precisely between the gaps in the wind, based on the information I had observed.

The second round, which had been chasing me, reacted to both types of slashes.

The mana slashes, which are difficult to control after being fired, were mostly dodged rather than countered.

The wind slashes, which have relatively weaker power but a tracking function, were deflected by Qi enveloping both hands.

With fluid hand movements, the Qi undulated like waves. The slashes caught in the waves twisted bizarrely and collided with each other.

There was no damage.

But it was consuming a breath.

As I watched the second round approach, dealing with countless slashes and the interference from the ground, I brought my hands together. I poured out thick mana, stretching it between my palms.

‘Homogenization, Fear Flame.’

-Fwoosh!

A simplified version of the Fear Flame bloomed from my grasp.

Emotions surged. Anxiety and doubt poured out. I controlled them well, using them as fuel for the Fear Flame.

I roughly shaped it into the form of a spear and grasped it.

The fire spirit rammed its body into the spear. The flames surged violently.

Normally, even a spirit would be harmed and forced into reverse summoning, but with precise control, I made it recognize me as an ally.

I twisted my body in midair. Instead of stepping on the ground, I stepped on the air, contracting my fully extended body and spinning as I thrust the spear.

A textbook throw.

The fierce flames cut through the air. The ground was painted red as if a meteor had fallen.

Simultaneously, I moved the lightning and earth spirits.

Kwarurung! Thunder echoed in the clear sky. The lightning spirit, which had been absorbing mana and rising into the sky, unleashed dozens of bolts.

The earth spirit, which had been seeping into the ground, moved.

The surface of the ground swelled and buckled, disrupting the balance, and sharp stalagmites shot up from below.

The incoming Fear Flame. The erupting earth and the descending lightning.

Even the second round couldn't ignore it, as it came to a halt. Despite the ground shaking violently and spikes rising, the second round remained calm and leaped in place.

Then, it spread one hand wide open, and Qi condensed in its palm, forming a long shape.

Gripping the Qi, which had been shaped into a sword, the second round slashed madly in all directions.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

One Face Six Arms

Lingering Sky, Chaotic Stab

Each time the sword slashed through the air, its mark was left behind. Red scars, as if blood was pouring from the wounds, appeared in every direction.

The Qi sword, swung at a terrifying speed, filled the area around the second round with slashes.

The Fear Flame spear, the lightning bolts, and the countless stalagmites crashed into the sword barrier.

-Kwaaaang!

The lightning surged through the ground. The Fear Flame, which spread with a powerful explosion, engulfed the sword barrier and the surrounding area.

The temperature in the area rose sharply.

The densely rising ground melted helplessly, and the flames, sucking in the wind, whipped up a fierce gale, causing my tattered clothes to flutter.

Soon, the Fear Flame subsided.

Amidst the still-burning embers clinging to the ground, the second round landed unscathed.

"……"

"……"

A moment of silence passed.

Only the crackling sound of the Fear Flame's embers could be heard as the second round stared at me.

Eyes as dark as those of a dead fish.

Eyes that, like mine, give off an unpleasant feeling of dissatisfaction.

The second round, a game character I had created by setting up and playing.

But for some reason, this mysterious existence was standing before me, wielding a weapon.

The second round is here. The moment I faced it directly, one hypothesis inevitably came to mind.

The second round exists.

Then, could there be other rounds? The first round, the third, the fourth, the fifth…

The ninth round, which massacred people and devoured them.

The tenth round, which committed mass slaughter and roamed around recharging with blood.

The eleventh round, which didn't value human life and raided various factions and institutions to grow stronger.

The twelfth round, which even established a colony to secure sacrifices…

'…I'll think about that later.'

It's a pointless thought.

At least, it's not something to worry about right now.

I buried the unnecessary thoughts and furrowed my brow, reviewing the battle.

A clash that lasted for a very short time.

Though the density was high, the actual time that passed was extremely brief.

To sum it up, I was beaten like a dog.

My side has accumulated significant damage, while the other side hasn't suffered any meaningful damage.

Did I act cocky by imitating the first technique I saw? I ended up getting counterattacked and gained nothing in return.

Although I haven't fully utilized Homogenization yet, breaking through the second round's defenses would still result in significant damage to me.

From the start, the fundamental difference in skill is overwhelming. Even if I say it nicely, I'm barely hanging onto my life.

A short-term battle is extremely disadvantageous.

According to the original information, the second round is even more fragile than I am.

If I land a solid hit with the Fear Flame just once, I win.

In fact, the second round just now went out of its way to invest energy in countering the Fear Flame.

However, the second round is also a glass cannon.

If it gets hit by a high-powered expansion ability… like the one it used on me earlier, it'll die just the same if its body is severed.

Breaking through all those expansion abilities and piercing through the second round's skill to land a direct hit is a difficult task.

'Would I have the advantage in a long-term battle?'

But in a prolonged battle, my chances increase.

According to the original information and my observations, the second round is weak in both stamina and mana.

Its physical level is extremely low compared to its skill, and the same goes for its mana.

In fact, the Qi of the second round, which is at its final spec, is being pushed back by the Qi of me, a first-year at Shio-ram.

Our physical abilities are similar. The wounds I managed to seal are gradually reopening, but I can regenerate.

If I bring out the Fear Flame, Taesan, or body amplification, I can surpass its physical level.

The second round has been conserving its mana.

It hasn't wrapped its entire body in Qi. It repeatedly manifests Qi on its limbs only when necessary, then dispels it to save mana.

'The second round doesn't have the stamina for a long-term battle.'

That was the case in the original as well. The second round required precise control due to its lack of specs.

In the end, didn't the second round die after exhausting its strength in a gang-up and wheel battle?

On the other hand, I can handle a long-term battle.

I have a vast mana capacity. I have plenty of mana reserves. I can also draw in the surrounding mana to replenish myself as much as I need.

I can also combine elementalization and unleash indiscriminate bombardment from the sky.

I have plenty of stamina. If necessary, I can use Homogenization to combine Taesan and Changhae.

Above all, I have the Power of Observation, Jack of All Trades, and Mana Affinity.

The longer the battle goes on, the more I can gather information about the second round and quickly grow.

A long-term battle is in my favor.

"……"

Did the second round realize that as well? It made a move.

The second round's heart pounded violently. Ku-ung! The vibration reached me even from a distance.

The intervals between the heartbeats shortened. The heart beat wildly, forcibly activating the body.

Kugeugeuk… The muscles inside the body swelled. A chilling cracking sound came from the tightly clenched fists.

The second round's already muscular body swelled even more.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Asura Path

A self-buff type expansion ability. Its effect is the amplification of physical abilities.

Immediately after, the second round spread both arms wide open.

It looked as if it were surrendering… or giving up and accepting its fate.

But I couldn't possibly think that was the case.

-Gu-gu-gung…

An intangible aura began to rise from the second round. Its presence expanded rapidly. It surged without any sign of stopping.

Finally, the intangible aura took on form and color.

Qi bloomed in both hands, shaping into weapons.

One hand gripped a sword, while the other held a long blade.

And then.

Two more arms appeared like mirages from the shoulders, each wielding a long-handled axe and a hammer.

A pair of arms that sprouted from the waist held a spear and a scythe.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

One Face Six Arms

One face.

Six arms.

Like the legendary Asura, three pairs of arms appeared.

Even now, the second round, with its ominous, abyss-like gaze, gripped the Qi-forged weapons and stared at me.

I blinked like a goldfish, then scrunched up my face as I deployed the Power of Space and Proof of Protection.

[How dare a bastard who's at least thirty bully a student?]

Immediately.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

Midsummer Festival

Lowly Heaven Sword, Soaring Dragon's Claw

Domination Strike, Skull Splitter

Resonance Strike

Snake Tail Overcoming Wall

Circumference Cervical Harvest

Six expansion abilities poured out at once.

Damn, it hurts.

How many times have I died?

* * *

[The "Blessing of Growth" is assisting your growth.]

[The "Special Blessing of Growth" is assisting your growth.]

[The "Blessing of Growth (Tower Entry)" is assisting your growth.]

…

[The "Curse of the Short-lived Beauty" is assisting your growth.]

[The "Curse of Loneliness" is assisting your growth.]

[The "Curse of Silence" is assisting your growth.]

…

[The Unique Ability “Jack of All Trades” is growing rapidly.]

[The Unique Ability “Mana Affinity” is growing.]

…

[The Master of the Tower of Harmony expresses doubt, wondering if this is correct.]

[The Master of the Tower of Knowledge lowers their gaze.]

[The Master of the Tower of Growth nods solemnly.]

CHAPTER 187
SECOND ROUND (3)

“Urgh, ugh…!”

Closed eyes. Thanks to that, the once pitch-black vision suddenly became colorful.

But it wasn’t a joyful sight. It wasn’t something truly visible. It was just the mind starting to break down, and hallucinations were surfacing in my brain.

I had just died.

A single slash had severed both my waist and wrist. Countless and continuous slashes had torn my body into pieces.

An axe descending from the sky split my head, and a hammer smashed my torso.

A spear blade, twisting like a snake, stabbed into my heart, and a scythe’s blade severed my neck.

The Power of Observation had predicted the outcome, but my body couldn’t respond to it.

A horrifying sensation violated my mind. The bizarre feeling of life being cut off and then reconnected stirred my brain.

But I didn’t die.

I regained consciousness.

I was lying on the wasteland where I had first entered The Tower of Growth, panting heavily.

‘Guhh… ’

After a moment, I sensed a presence within the range of my Power of Observation. It was the second round.

It was approaching, step by step, from a distance.

The inventory opened. From the rippling space, a pitch-black iron spear was drawn. The second round, gripping the spear shaft, steadily approached.

I hurriedly got up. My brain and intestines felt like they had been mashed into a pulp, but my body swiftly prepared for battle.

‘I can’t die too much.’

A head-on fight wouldn’t work.

From the start, their skill was overwhelming. There was no need to mention their expanded abilities; I was clearly outmatched. Just by getting close, the second round had the advantage.

I couldn’t recklessly charge in and die. Experiencing death would rapidly drain my mental and spiritual strength.

When my spiritual strength finally hit rock bottom, a catastrophe would occur where my powers would shut down.

‘Let’s create some distance.’

If I did that, they might pull out a bow and start firing their archery-based expanded abilities, but if I combined Taesan and spirit transformation, I could endure it.

And if I dragged it out long enough…

…

Suddenly, I stopped thinking. My body, which had been retreating, froze.

A sense of doubt crept in.

What was I trying to achieve by dragging it out?

Gather information? Even with the Power of Observation, the fastest and most accurate way to gather information and absorb their skills in real time was to confront them directly.

'…This is The Tower of Growth.'

This is a place for growth. Survival or victory isn't the important thing.

Even if I eventually lose, it's a place where I can return, having grown.

You don't die here. Even if your body is torn apart, it's restored, and though your mind might suffer, it remains intact.

The blessing of growth amplifies. I'm experiencing it even now. My body is burning with growth in real-time, and my skills are rapidly improving.

Though I have no intention of doing so, if I declare my intent to give up, I can return to reality immediately.

The time I can stay in this convenient and absurd space is, at most, five days. It's a very short time.

So what am I so afraid of that I'm wasting time, trying to endure safely by keeping my distance?

It's not even worth considering.

'…Manifest power, space.'

Gritting my teeth, I opened a subspace. From within, I pulled out one of the many weapons I had prepared, a spear.

It was similar to the one used by the second round.

There's no chance of winning in a head-on fight.

From the start, their skill is overwhelming.

There's no need to mention expanded abilities; I'm clearly outmatched. Engaging in close combat is a losing strategy.

Instead, I'll show even steeper growth.

My body and mind will hurt. For some reason, the sensations are implemented as if they were real, so it's going to hurt like hell.

Fear crept in. No matter how much time passes, one's nature doesn't change, and even getting pricked by a needle is enough to make me tear up in fear.

Right now, I could use that as an excuse to retreat, but in the future, I won't be able to.

In truly critical moments, when I absolutely cannot back down, when I must not fall…

It won't just be me, a worthless person, dying. It'll be a situation where someone far more precious than me could get hurt.

To overcome such moments… I need to grow now.

Gripping the spear, I walked toward the second round.

* * *

The space Baek Ahrin faced upon entering The Tower of Growth was a snowfield, covered in a thick layer of pristine white snow.

The river that should have flowed gently was frozen solid, and the bare branches of trees were adorned not with green leaves, but with white snow

blossoms.

Baek Ahrin raised her hand slightly.

Soon, a small snowflake fell onto the back of her hand. It wasn't a heavy snowfall, just a light flurry, yet it landed precisely on her hand.

The snow wasn't cold.

The snowflake clinging to her hand didn't melt from her body heat.

There was no reason for it to melt, as her body temperature was similar to the snow.

Baek Ahrin's Changhae was particularly specialized in cold. Though she could handle water energy proficiently, her talents were focused on the cold.

As a result, Baek Ahrin's body was naturally adapted to contain cold energy.

The energy flowing through her circuits was a chilling cold, and even her blood running through her veins felt so cool that it seemed almost cold.

Her bones, muscles, and skin were all so cold that there was no warmth to be found.

Her body, frozen in such a way, also had dulled senses.

'It's cold.'

But Baek Ahrin felt the snow was cold. Even though it was at a temperature similar to her own… perhaps even warmer, she still felt it as cold.

In fact, it wasn't just the snow. Her mana, her blood… she simply perceived her body as cold.

It was a deeply unpleasant feeling. A physiological aversion arose. No matter how much she burned it with fire, her body showed no signs of melting, and

it was tiresome.

Baek Ahrin brushed off the snow and turned her head.

The surroundings had changed considerably since she first entered.

The snow that had blanketed the ground had long since disappeared. The aftermath of the battle had torn up the barren earth, revealing the desolate soil beneath.

“Can’t you speak?”

She turned her head slightly and asked the figure lying in the large crater.

White frost covered its body, and the torn stumps of its limbs were frozen solid, with not a drop of blood seeping out.

It was a copy of Baek Ahrin, created by The Tower of Growth.

“Can’t communicate? Is it a functional issue, or did someone deliberately block it…?”

The copy couldn’t communicate. She had tried talking to it, but the copy merely attacked challengers with murderous intent.

“Well, I guess it’d be creepy if a copy could talk.”

Talking to a copy you have to beat to death… that wouldn’t feel good at all.

Baek Ahrin nodded to herself.

She had just finished subduing her copy.

Of course, Baek Ahrin wasn’t completely unscathed either.

Her head was disheveled, and she had wounds all over her body, but she felt no pain. At least, she wasn’t in as bad a shape as the copy.

‘It took about four days…? Tough.’

She had first hunted her copy on the very first day.

Since their abilities and skills were identical, her odds of winning were fifty-fifty if they fought immediately.

But it had taken four days for her to subdue it as easily as she did now.

‘Yeon-hwa probably did it faster, huh? She’s such a battle maniac, she’s probably already beaten hers and moved on to fighting other monsters or something.’

In other words, Baek Ahrin had grown enough in three days to easily defeat the version of herself that had first entered the tower.

‘This tower is really broken… ’

The blessing of growth, the effects of entering the tower… everything was absurdly overpowered.

Thanks to that, the young superhumans and their guardians didn’t dare challenge Shio-ram and were groveling at their feet.

‘I wish I could come here every week.’

If she could, she felt she could reach the top tier within half a year. Of course, that was impossible in reality…

– Crackle…

While Baek Ahrin was briefly recovering her mind and body, the copy, still wearing that emotionless gaze, twitched as it lay on the ground.

It seemed to be trying to resist, but the ice stakes firmly embedded in its body completely suppressed any movement.

The stakes were imbued with curses of suppression and wound weakening. With so many driven into it, moving was impossible.

Moreover, its core and circuits were shattered, and it had no remaining mana, so there was no chance of a counterattack.

"……"

Baek Ahrin stared down at the copy. Its severed limbs wriggling on the ground made it look like a bug.

The copy had the same appearance as Baek Ahrin.

Clear, sea-colored eyes and long, soft hair.

The curves of her body, her facial features, and even the nature of her mana circuits and core were identical.

But there was a difference.

The copy didn't smile. Its eyes were emotionless, and its lips didn't curve into a smile.

That alone completely changed how others would perceive Baek Ahrin.

Where she once gave the impression of a vast, serene sea, now she looked like a cold, static glacier.

"Tsk."

She hated everything about it—the cold, sluggish body, the expressionless face that didn't even know how to smile.

No matter how hard she tried to overcome it, there was little improvement. Her only small hope was to rely on Hong Yeon-hwa.

But recently, a greater possibility had emerged.

Baek Ahrin smiled brightly and lightly hopped forward.

She approached the copy lying in the crater.

After glancing at the copy, which was still wriggling in vain, she gripped the ice spear she had formed with her Changhae.

The sharp point of the spear gleamed as it aimed at the copy.

“Well then… Should I summon a monster too?”

– Crunch!

The spear plunged into the copy’s chest.

* * *

– Crunch!

In an instant, a spear flashed and pierced the chest.

I could feel the cold, sharp force burrowing into my flesh.

With a tight grip, I barely managed to grab the spear shaft, stopping it just as its tip scraped against my ribs.

A brief struggle ensued.

If this continued, I’d be skewered.

Lee Hayul struck the spear shaft with his fist.

Jack of All Trades Expansion Ability

[Ever-changing Swordsmanship – Breaking Iron Staff]

Crunch! The black iron spear shaft snapped like a brittle reed.

The second round abandoned the spear without hesitation and moved their hands. Their hands, wrapped in red qi, shot forward.

I've faced this several times already. If they grab you, they'll tear your limbs off, and if you take consecutive hits, your heart and head will explode.

Lee Hayul reached out as well.

Pop! White and red afterimages danced as their hands intertwined in a flurry.

The second round's eyes locked onto Lee Hayul.

Their hand shot out like a flash of lightning, aiming to grab and twist his limbs.

He reacted. In an instant, Lee Hayul's elbow slammed down on their forearm.

After deflecting the attack, Lee Hayul reached out in return.

His movement was different from the second round's. Like fog rolling in, his figure blurred, aiming for their throat.

'Expansion Ability.'

They deflected. After reading his movement, they twisted their trajectory. Immediately, the second round's eyes found a small opening.

Boom! They took a short step forward, driving their body into him, twisting their shoulders.

Manjong Martial Arts Expansion Ability

[Treading Breaking Mountain]

A body slam included in the expansion ability. The second round's massive frame crashed into Lee Hayul.

– Boom!

A massive shockwave erupted. The ground shook violently.

A tremendous impact surged through his body. Lee Hayul calmly stomped the ground.

– Crack!

The ground collapsed instantly. The dirt crumbled into dust and vanished. Lee Hayul, having skillfully absorbed the impact, opened his hand.

Qi swirled around his elbow like a vortex.

He had learned to replace the water energy in the Whirlpool Water Palm with qi, and he unleashed a strike.

– Roarrrr!

A white vortex expanded. The swirling qi swept everything in front of him.

Just before the vortex expanded fully, the second round withdrew from the attack range and lightly landed at a distance.

The rampaging vortex gradually subsided.

Although the dust clouded the surroundings, the second round's eyes accurately locked onto Lee Hayul.

He shook off the vortex swirling around his arm and turned his body.

'……'

The second round analyzed the previous exchange.

Lee Hayul, when he first entered The Tower of Growth.

He had many skills and decent abilities, but he was manageable. Even when

he revealed his tricks, and especially when he focused on close combat, the second round could easily subdue him.

But now…

‘It’s not so easy to subdue him.’

Even with considerable skill on display, he was difficult to overpower.

In fact, he was even counterattacking.

It had only been a few days, yet Lee Hayul’s abilities were skyrocketing at a terrifying pace.

Though it was intended, even with the blessing of growth, the second round found his progress astonishing.

‘Is this what it means to be the real deal?’

It was a foolish thought, but it also felt a bit disheartening.

Hiding his bitter feelings, the second round faced the charging Lee Hayul.

* * *

[Unique Ability [Jack of All Trades] is growing rapidly]

CHAPTER 188
EXIT

During the Tower entrance schedule, the professors in charge of the respective grades gathered in one place.

The reason was to discuss the progress of the entrance process and to respond immediately in case of an emergency.

The theme for this semester's Tower entrance was Contemplation.

The content was simple.

A fight against a copy of oneself.

After overcoming oneself, the cadet could summon another entity upon request, but the basic premise was a battle against their own copy.

As a result, unlike the first semester's Tower entrance, the evaluation criteria were not as diverse or strict.

From the start…

"At this point, can't we just let them go? They don't even share any real-time footage…"

A voice echoed in the otherwise silent space.

It was Lee Suyeon, the professor in charge of the elite class.

Several professors inwardly nodded at her words, as she propped her chin on her hand and muttered in a bored tone.

Unlike the first semester's Tower entrance, there were very few holograms

projected on the table.

Even those were not real-time videos but just charts with simple formulas and statistics.

For some reason, there was no real-time video sharing for this Tower entrance.

As a result, the first-year professors gathered here were all dealing with their own work.

The assistant professor near Lee Suyeon responded with a wry smile.

“There could be an emergency.”

“An emergency that’s never happened before. It might just be complacency, but honestly, what kind of accident could happen here? At most, a fistfight between cadets?”

“Haha…”

The security of Shio-ram was notoriously tight.

There had been countless attempts, but not a single minor intrusion had ever been allowed. The term ‘impregnable’ was fitting.

The idea of something going wrong in Shio-ram was hard for Lee Suyeon to imagine.

Still, since it was the policy, Lee Suyeon remained in her seat.

In any case, since the first-year professors had gathered, several meetings took place.

“Will this year’s Birth Festival be held like last year?”

“The Vice Principal mentioned that this year it would be even grander.”

“Really? Last year was already so grand; it was fun. Especially going around visiting the cadet-run stalls… Ah, but now I’m a grade professor…”

The main topic of discussion was the Birth Festival.

The Birth Festival was a celebration held at the end of the year in Shio-ram.

It was a festival tradition that had continued since the early days of Shio-ram, meant to celebrate the future of the children who would leave the cradle and venture into the world.

While the process and schedule had changed a lot since then, the fundamental essence of it being a festival to eat, enjoy, and play remained the same.

Thus, the schedule was more or less the same every year.

It was ultimately a schedule designed for the participants to enjoy.

There were entertainment contests, competitions where magical artifacts were displayed, and of course, stalls selling delicious food, drinks, and alcohol.

While local businesses from the commercial district participated, cadets also set up their own stalls.

Recalling the memories of last year, when she had fun eating and drinking, Lee Suyeon’s expression brightened.

But then, she remembered that this year she was a first-year professor and was involved in the festival preparations, and her brightened face quickly turned gloomy.

Being a professor didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy the festival, but she wouldn’t be able to relax and enjoy it like last year…

“……”

"……"

While the meeting continued, there were two people who didn't participate in the discussion about the Birth Festival.

Liana and Atra.

Liana listened attentively to the conversation around her with wide eyes, while Atra sat with her eyes closed.

In other words, neither of them spoke.

If anything, they couldn't find a way to join the conversation.

"Professor Atra, don't you have any opinions?"

Liana, who had been glancing around, whispered to Atra, who was sitting next to her. Atra opened her eyes and glanced at Liana.

Atra was not originally a graduate of Shio-ram.

She was from the British Academy. They had festivals there too, but at the time, Atra was a training fanatic who spent all her time in the training room, burning with determination.

"No, I don't. I don't know enough to add anything. Shouldn't you be the one with an opinion? You've experienced it firsthand."

"…Me? I don't really… have any opinions."

Liana stretched out her words, avoiding the question.

She was a graduate of Shio-ram, having experienced the Birth Festival four times from her first to fourth year.

But Liana had never really enjoyed the festival.

While others were setting up stalls and participating in competitions, having

fun, Liana was either buried in books in the library or playing with spirits in deserted areas.

Although many wanted to enjoy the festival with Liana, who had consistently taken the top spot, she had never actively participated.

At the time, Liana had a peculiar personality that was hard to describe, having never tasted the bitterness of the Demonic Realm.

In any case, both of them were far removed from the word 'festival.'

And with no real-time footage of Lee Hayul's Tower entrance being shared, time felt like it was floating aimlessly.

At least Liana had work to do as the Ipchun class professor, but Atra had nothing to do.

So Liana busied herself with work, while Atra spent her time contemplating Lee Hayul's training schedule.

-Bzzzt…

"…Huh?"

A hologram floated above the table.

The hologram displayed the slowly opening entrance of the Tower, with ripples spreading across the screen.

Everyone who saw the screen widened their eyes. It was the afternoon of the fourth day of the Tower entrance. There was still about a day left before it was supposed to end.

"Who's coming out? Hold on, let me check the records…"

Several professors hurriedly flipped through the holograms.

"…Cadet Lee Hayul?"

Someone voiced their confusion.

Before the words fully registered, Atra and Liana had already shot up from their seats.

On the screen, Lee Hayul, who had been spat out from the Tower's entrance, was staggering precariously. The sight made both of their hearts sink.

That fragile child—what had he gone through this time to be exiting the Tower early? Why was he swaying like that again?

Suppressing the rising sense of unease, they rushed out and headed toward the Tower's entrance.

"…!?"

Atra, who had dashed out in a panic, came to a sudden halt.

Her body instinctively stopped her from rushing forward.

Her mind wanted to run to Lee Hayul immediately and check on him.

"…What…"

Her fine hairs stood on end.

Her instincts were warning her not to approach. Her accumulated experience was telling her that it was dangerous.

Lee Hayul's aura had changed.

The aura, which had always been faint and fluctuating, had undergone a drastic transformation.

It felt as if the aura had materialized into a blade, ready to grind everything around it into dust.

A cold, phantom sensation of a deadly weapon brushed against the back of her neck.

It was an ominous aura, so intense that even Atra felt her body freeze.

Unknowingly, a drop of cold sweat trickled down her cheek.

“My god.”

“…What on earth happened in the Tower?”

Even Liana and the other professors who had followed behind were frozen in place, overwhelmed by the terrifying aura.

A strange standoff ensued.

Just as someone swallowed nervously—

[Master?]

[Professor Liana?]

The necklace around Lee Hayul’s neck clicked. A voice, distorted as if filled with noise, echoed faintly.

At the same time, the ominous aura subsided.

Lee Hayul’s complexion, which had appeared strangely cold, gradually returned to his usual soft, round appearance.

While everyone else was still bewildered by the sudden change, Lee Hayul began to walk slowly.

Some of the onlookers remained tense, unable to relax after the earlier menacing aura.

But Lee Hayul paid no attention to them.

He walked straight toward his target.

And then, he buried his face in Atra's chest.

"…?"

Atra, who had also been standing frozen, blinked.

Lee Hayul had embraced her.

Her body moved on reflex.

She spread her arms and, without hesitation, pulled him into her embrace.

Naturally, she wrapped her arms around his waist, gently placed a hand on his head, and carefully stroked it.

With each stroke, Lee Hayul burrowed deeper into her embrace.

Holding Lee Hayul in her arms wasn't a big deal.

With that thought, she comforted the child, who was now clinging to her and acting spoiled.

"What happened this time…"

Liana, who had also approached, did the same.

She didn't know the reason, but seeing the child suddenly acting strange, she hurried over and began patting Lee Hayul's head and back, trying to soothe him.

"…It's heartwarming to see such a strong bond between a master and disciple, but could we first sort out the situation?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

“It’s not my place to interfere in personal matters, but… isn’t this a bit much for such an open space?”

It went on for quite some time.

It wasn’t until Professor Albert, unable to wait any longer, intervened that the two professors snapped back to their senses.

When they finally looked up and around, they noticed the strange looks directed at them from all sides.

“Oh my…”

Among the onlookers, there were many curious expressions. Lee Suyeon, in particular, had her eyes wide open, covering her mouth with one hand in amazement.

* * *

In the world filled with violent explosions, silence had descended.

The wasteland, where not even a blade of grass could be found, had long since become useless, desolate land.

Deep craters, cracks, and signs of destruction…

These were the aftermath of countless clashes of martial arts and the expansion abilities that had collided repeatedly.

Sitting on a mound of dirt, raised by the force of the impacts, the second round absentmindedly rubbed his shoulder.

Pain spread through his body.

A wound stretched from his right shoulder to his left hip.

For the second round, it wasn’t anything new.

He had sustained countless injuries in his lifetime. Some had left lasting aftereffects, while others had healed but left unsightly scars.

His appearance was so gruesome that even a healthy adult might faint upon seeing his face.

"…Ha…"

But now, the second round felt a complicated mix of emotions about this wound.

Even though the second round had lowered his physical level to match…

It was a wound inflicted by none other than the 'real' version of himself. A wound that should never have been possible.

This wound had been the success condition for the trial, and the real version had just left.

His mental strength had already hit rock bottom, so the second round had also been planning to take a break.

'…Haha… '

As he traced the wound, the second round couldn't help but feel the difference between the fake and the real.

After spending what felt like an eternity rolling in pools of blood, honing and mastering his skills, the real version had managed to grasp them, albeit clumsily, in just a few days.

The gap was overwhelming.

The more he realized it, the more he let out a hollow laugh.

Moreover, was it even accurate to say he had been alive? The fake had never been the real thing.

“…You seem to have a light step.”

Muttering to himself as he absentmindedly traced the wound, the second round spoke. There was no sound. No vibration, no flow of mana.

But the second round’s senses, his Manjong Martial Arts, detected the change. The other party hadn’t bothered to hide their presence.

Without turning around, the second round continued speaking to the presence behind him.

“It’s absurd. When I was desperately searching, I couldn’t even find a strand of your hair, and now that I’m a dead ghost, you show your face?”

There was no response. The other party remained silent.

“Why are you showing yourself but keeping your mouth shut? If you’re going to stay quiet, why don’t you crawl back to where you came from? Or did you come to mock this pathetic sight?”

『G…!? N…!』

In response to the second round’s dry question, a strange sound echoed.

What should he call it? It was like hearing the outside world with ears submerged underwater.

Of course, it was far worse than that—so garbled that it was impossible to interpret.

“Ridiculous… I’ll just lament by myself.”

The second round scratched his ear and shook his head.

“I understand your approach… It’s better to suffer now and be happy later than to lose everything and die miserably later.”

The second round had personally struck the real version. He had long since realized that Lee Hayul's pain receptors were active. But he hadn't stopped hitting him.

Stopping just because of that would have been a waste of this opportunity. The presence behind him, bowing its head, likely thought the same.

In fact, Lee Hayul had returned with results far exceeding expectations.

Though still immature, he would figure out how to use it eventually.

He was an absurd existence.

And the Tower Masters' choices were understandable… under… under… understand…

Suddenly, the second round stopped speaking.

Instead, memories flashed through his mind.

A life that was long if you considered it long, short if you considered it short.

A life that could seem rich or thin, depending on how you looked at it.

A life that was nothing more than a shell, a fake.

"…I understand. Given your position, this was the best and most efficient choice."

Once again, the presence behind him remained silent.

"No matter how much I understand, I can't help but hate you."

His grip tightened. The veins on his scarred hand bulged.

"I understand that your intentions were good, that you didn't mean for me to suffer like this, and that this was the best option. But… I can't bring myself to like you."

Birth, growth, the cradle, bitterness, yearning, loss, helplessness, desperation, anxiety, death…

The second round—Lee Hayul—recalled his life. It had been full of ups and downs, and it had been miserable.

He hadn't achieved anything. His skills had been woefully inadequate for his ambitions.

He had struggled, fought, and clung desperately, but in the end, he had died pitifully because he wasn't good enough.

And even that wretched life wasn't real.

It was just one possible path, a mere observation.

That fact filled him with unbearable disgust. It felt as if his entire life had been denied.

No, it *had* been denied. His life wasn't real.

『……』

There was no response.

Perhaps the other party couldn't speak, or maybe they could but were too ashamed to do so. They simply bowed their head and accepted the criticism.

Seeing this, the second round let out a deep sigh.

"…Still, I don't want you to suffer to the point of death."

As much as he hated them, their actions weren't wrong.

If this plan succeeded, the world wouldn't be destroyed, and the real Lee Hayul would ultimately live the happy life he had always wanted.

The presence behind him trembled noticeably. Perhaps they hadn't expected

to hear such words.

“So do it properly. You don’t have any other options, do you?”

The second round… Lee Hayul didn’t wish for others to suffer the same pain just because he had.

“At least the real one deserves to be happy.”

The long conversation came to an end. As Lee Hayul finished speaking, his body began to dissolve into particles of light.

* * *

Meanwhile, inside the Tower of Growth’s communal training room.

“Yeon-hwa, can we talk about Hayul for a moment?”

“…Hayul?”

At Elia’s sudden suggestion, as she clapped her hands together, Hong Yeon-hwa’s expression became somewhat sour.

CHAPTER 189
BLUE IS BETTER THAN INDIGO?

The fierce struggle with my second iteration had finally ended.

I had been through quite an ordeal.

My body still ached all over. I had been cut, stabbed, beaten, bruised, and torn… It was a tough time.

Especially from the middle of the fight, my mental strength had been completely drained, causing my powers to flicker out.

When the Power of Space vanished, it became difficult to retrieve my weapons from the subspace, and I couldn't even use attraction and repulsion.

Moreover, because I couldn't seal the inventory of my second iteration, he pulled out all sorts of weapons and relentlessly tormented me.

I had carried quite a few weapons myself, but the things that popped out of his inventory were beyond belief.

He wielded blades of different lengths in both hands, slicing through the air with precision, playing with the distance between us. He even used something resembling a flail to bash me from all directions, leaving me disoriented.

There were also clawed blades… karambits, sabers, spears with countless blades attached like tree branches, maces…

I had trained with Master and handled many weapons, but the number of weapons my second iteration used was on a whole different level.

Even if you raided a massive armory or a weapon museum, you'd find fewer weapons than he had.

After that, even my Power of Observation stopped, limiting my ability to gather information.

From that point on, it became much harder to respond to his movements.

I tried to cope with the situation using the reflex training I had steadily practiced for such scenarios.

It wasn't as effective as Observation, but I could move well enough to continue fighting.

Of course, without Observation, I was a mess.

[Please pat me more…]

In short, I was mentally exhausted.

So, I wanted some emotional comfort. That simple logic led me to cling to Master, whining like a child in real-time.

"You never have a peaceful day, do you?"

[Ehehe…]

"That's not a compliment…"

Master muttered, sounding both exasperated and amused.

It was unfair.

It wasn't like I was causing trouble on purpose; it was just that everyone around me kept giving me a hard time.

I shook my head in frustration, feeling the soft sensation of my hair rubbing against her.

With the steady thumping of Master's heartbeat, the tension that had been tightly wound inside me slowly began to ease.

After a bit of struggling, I finally relaxed, letting myself go limp.

"Haa…"

Master let out a bitter smile but, as if she couldn't help herself, patted my head gently.

[Feels good…]

With a silly grin plastered on my face, I clung to Master even more desperately.

Before I knew it, we had returned to Master's home, where we were now lying side by side on her bed, resting.

When I had just come out of the Tower of Growth, I was too out of it to think straight, but I vaguely remembered the conversations that had taken place.

Apparently, today was the fourth day since I had entered the Tower. Everyone seemed surprised that I had come out a day early.

Worried about my poor condition, Master had left the Tower midway to bring me back home.

Since I was already out of the Tower, I wanted to go see Seo-yul right away, but… I was in no state to do so.

I wanted to show Seo-yul a reliable, dignified side of me since I was her guardian, after all.

…Though it was probably too late for that.

I had already shown Seo-yul plenty of pathetic sides of myself.

Even though I was supposed to be her protector, I was starting to worry that my image had been completely trashed.

Of course, kind-hearted Seo-yul still listened to me well, but…

…Anyway, for now, I was lying next to Master, recovering my mental strength.

– I'll take care of Hayul. You stay here.

– Huh? Why? I want to go too…

– You're in charge of the Ipchun class. There are still plenty of cadets who haven't come out yet. What are you going to do if the professor in charge disappears midway?

–… Why do you only make sense at times like this…

Master was in charge of the special admissions students. The reason she had been with the first-year professors was because I was a first-year student.

In other words, once I came out of the Tower, there was no reason for her to stay there any longer.

On the other hand, Professor Liana was the professor in charge of the Ipchun class. Just because I had come out didn't mean she could abandon the rest of the cadets still inside.

So, Professor Liana had remained behind, looking rather displeased.

'Was I forcibly ejected?'

The Tower of Growth had basic safety mechanisms in place.

One of its primary functions was to expel cadets immediately if they were deemed to be in danger.

It also minimized pain, considering the cadets' mental well-being…

‘What the hell. That wasn’t the case for me, though.’

A sudden thought made me frown.

I could still vividly remember the shock of the moment my throat was first slashed.

Why was my second iteration there? Why was a character from the game moving around like that? Oh, my throat’s been cut. But why does it hurt? It hurts like hell…

At the time, everything was happening so fast that I couldn’t dwell on it, but now that I had time to think, it was absurd.

‘I’m going to complain.’

If the Principal was absent, I would go to the Vice-Principal and demand an explanation.

And above all, what was that?

The second iteration.

The nickname I had given it was “Two Ghost.”

The system’s official title was ‘Combat Aptitude Asura,’ a grandiose epithet.

What I fought was undoubtedly my second iteration. There was no denying it.

The artifacts it wore, the techniques it used, and, most importantly, the combination of its expansion abilities, Asura Path and One Face Six Arms…

Every element pointed to the second iteration.

‘What the hell is going on?’

It wasn’t just encountering a character from the game; it was the fact that the

character I had created and controlled was standing right there, slicing me apart.

It was confusing.

The way it moved, the mastery of its weaponry, the combat techniques, and the strategic maneuvers—it was all so overwhelming, even for me, who possessed the Power of Observation.

The way it handled the differences in physical capabilities between the manifestation and deactivation of Qi, the skillful manipulation of rapid acceleration and deceleration…

And the varied, intricate applications of Qi, which went far beyond simply enveloping the body and weapons.

These weren't just techniques input into a system—they were the result of profound, hard-earned experience.

It was unimaginable that a character I had merely set up for fun could move like that.

But above all…

– Sorry for tormenting you. You did well.

Just before I left the Tower… as I lay there, incapacitated, that voice had whispered into my ear.

The voice was chilling, like metal scraping against metal, but it was filled with complex emotions that were still vivid in my memory.

'……'

My head hurt. A headache throbbed through my skull.

"What's making you frown like that again?"

As I furrowed my brow deeply, Master's fingers pressed firmly against my forehead, smoothing the wrinkles.

"Your pretty face is going to get ruined. Stop frowning all the time."

[Eeeh…]

[It feels nice.]

[Relief.]

[Massage.]

The tension in my forehead melted away on its own. Master chuckled softly and began massaging various parts of my face, loosening the muscles.

As my body squirmed in response to the soothing sensation, the necklace around my neck clicked faintly.

'Didn't that sound a bit different than usual… No, it's fine. The functions are working properly.'

I felt a vague sense of discomfort at the sound, but I pushed it aside for now, along with my worries about the second iteration.

[I worked really hard.]

[I deserve a reward.]

[So, I demand more head pats.]

"…I don't need a reason to pat you. I can do it anytime. But more importantly, I want to hear how my disciple struggled. Can you tell me?"

After a while, Master, seeming to think I had recovered enough, asked me in a gentle voice.

'…What happened in the Tower, huh… '

I hesitated for a moment.

Of course, I couldn't explain it.

How could I, when I didn't know what was going on myself? I had no idea what had happened.

No, maybe that was just an excuse.

Perhaps I was just afraid that if I started rambling about everything, I might end up being disliked.

'Hmm… '

I checked my condition.

My mental strength had recovered quite a bit. Normally, I would have been blind for several days, but thanks to the Tower of Growth, I could now use my Power of Observation again.

[I'll show you directly.]

After some thought, I decided to show Master the results of this Tower entry.

* * *

Atra stood at the other end of the training ground, looking at Lee Hayul with a complicated expression.

'Show me directly, huh… What did he gain?'

Worried that he might collapse and start vomiting blood, Atra had cautiously asked him what he had gained, only for him to suddenly suggest heading to the training ground to show her.

Of course, she had tried to stop him at first. After all, the boy had been staggering around just moments ago, barely able to stand. The idea of

sparring didn't sit well with her.

But after Lee Hayul's earnest persuasion—insisting that he was fine now—Atra had reluctantly agreed, and they had arrived at the training ground.

Physically, he seemed perfectly fine, without a scratch. And mentally… could he have recovered so quickly? Normally, he would have spent the whole day clinging to her, whining.

Perhaps the Tower of Growth had accelerated his mental recovery as well.

Atra felt both relieved and oddly disappointed by that…

[Then, I'll begin now.]

"Alright."

Soon, Lee Hayul signaled that he was ready.

'Whatever it is, I'll see for myself.'

Atra cleared her mind of distractions and sharpened her focus.

She didn't take it lightly.

She knew all too well how much Lee Hayul's skills had grown, to the point where the term "rapid growth" felt like an understatement.

At this point, Lee Hayul could easily overwhelm even a top-tier hero.

Even just by utilizing his Qi and its applications.

Let alone his mastery of magic, elemental spirits, and that absurd ability to mimic unique powers… The range of techniques at his disposal was endless.

After all, this was the same Lee Hayul who had defeated the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, albeit in its weakened state, a creature ranked at the 4th Tier.

The 4th Tier.

That's a rank only assigned to alpha entities in a 2nd-grade dungeon.

A top-tier hero would find it difficult to take one down alone, and even then, there were so many variables that they might lose their life.

Although the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had been weakened in various ways… it was still a 4th Tier creature—originally a 3rd Tier one—that Hayul had slain.

Of course, this was just a simple sparring match. It wouldn't be appropriate to use every trick in the book.

Keeping that in mind, Atra prepared herself.

– Tap.

Suddenly, Lee Hayul appeared like a ghost and grabbed her wrist.

'……!?'

Atra's eyes widened in shock.

Lee Hayul's figure blurred, as if shrouded in mist, and then he was suddenly right beside her.

She reacted immediately.

Without thinking, she pulled back, channeling power into her body. Her Qi activated reflexively, enhancing her physical capabilities.

But her extended hand was effortlessly caught.

It was as if her hand had been swallowed by a dense fog, disappearing into nothingness as it reached toward him.

Tap! Like lightning emerging from a cloud, his hand shot out and gripped her

wrist firmly.

'This is…!?'

It was a movement that defied the laws of physics, a bizarre and extraordinary technique.

Just from observing his movements, she could feel a distinct mental image being transmitted through his actions.

'Expansion ability…!'

A technique-based expansion ability.

And not just any half-baked attempt at it—he was using it with incredible proficiency, to the point where it even deceived Atra's senses for a brief moment.

The true power of a technique-based ability comes from its expansion.

Especially in one-on-one combat, technique-based expansion abilities are notoriously troublesome.

Atra herself possessed a technique-based unique ability. She had even developed her own expansion ability.

'Too late—'

But it was too late to use it now. There had been hesitation. It wasn't an expansion ability they had agreed to use beforehand. She wasn't confident in her control over it.

In the moment of hesitation, her body spun. Her vision shifted rapidly.

Bang! In the next moment, the sky, tinged with the colors of dusk, filled the edges of her view.

"……"

Dust briefly rose into the air before settling back down.

Her accelerated thoughts gradually returned to normal speed. Although it felt like she had been in a state of shock and confusion for a long time, only a brief moment had passed.

[How was that?]

The faint sound of metal clicking echoed.

Atra blinked blankly.

Not at the edges of her vision, but right in front of her… filling her entire field of view… was Lee Hayul's face.

He had thrown her to the ground in an instant and was now straddling her.

A satisfied smile played on his lips, and his cheeks were flushed with the glow of accomplishment.

Even the usually emotionless voice of the necklace seemed to carry a hint of pride.

She wasn't hurt. Her body was far too resilient to be affected by such an impact.

"…Wha, what…"

But her mind was in pain. To be precise, she was utterly confused and… shocked.

'Just now… no, right now.'

She had started a sparring match with her disciple, let her guard down, and ended up flat on her back.

That was all.

[I've grown a lot, haven't I?]

"…Wha, what…?"

The voice of the necklace echoed in her ears, snapping her out of her daze.

Atra blinked and quickly checked her situation.

Both her hands were pinned above her head, held in place by Lee Hayul, who was sitting on top of her.

[How was it!]

[Even though you let your guard down, I won!]

Lee Hayul beamed at her with a bright, innocent smile. His body swayed slightly back and forth, as if he couldn't contain his excitement.

"Hic…!"

Atra's body jerked in response to the sensation pressing against her chest.

In order to pin her hands, Lee Hayul had positioned himself quite high on her torso. As a result, his pelvis was pressing against a rather… sensitive area.

It was an incredibly awkward position.

The unfamiliar sensation made a strange sound escape her lips, a sound she couldn't believe she had made herself.

Mortified by the noise, Atra's eyes widened as she tried to cover her mouth…

– Squeeze…

But she couldn't. Her hands were still pinned down by Lee Hayul.

“Wha, what… No, wait, just a moment…”

Atra’s face turned a bright red, even more vivid than the colors of the setting sun.

Her pupils trembled as if an earthquake had struck them.

* * *

[Player Correction System: Measurement]

[Emotional State]

[Sense of Accomplishment] : Pleased to have achieved something

[Expectation] : Anticipating praise

[Excitement] : Overcome with emotion

…

[?] : Countless ^ @? Feelings

CHAPTER 190
OUTING (1)

The entrance ceremony ended smoothly, and the weekend had arrived.

It was a well-deserved holiday, even according to the law.

Even cadets like Shio-ram, who are still human after all, usually take a break on weekends.

Of course, some cadets, burdened by various circumstances, still attend supplementary lectures or, overwhelmed by assignments, look like livestock being dragged to a slaughterhouse…

But today, I was in the position of heading out for an outing.

[Alright, Seo-yul, arms up!]

“Up!”

[Good job.]

Seo-yul responded to the signal by raising both arms high.

Seeing her brimming with energy, I smiled and helped her change into the prepared outing clothes.

This weekend, I had decided to spend time outside with Seo-yul.

Lately, I had been too busy running around, and I hadn’t been able to spend much time with her.

As a result, every time I returned to the dormitory, I had to face her gaze filled with disappointment.

In order to soothe that disappointment, which ruthlessly pricked at my conscience, I decided to spend a day with her over the weekend.

Besides, Seo-yul had grown quite a bit, enough that we could now go out together.

“Ta-da!”

Seo-yul raised her arms high once again.

Her outfit was a neat sailor-collared dress.

It was white, matching her hair, with a V-shaped opening in the front, and a square piece of fabric draped over her shoulders and back.

I don’t know much about fashion, but it was a design commonly seen in navy uniforms.

“Ta-da!”

Seo-yul stared intently at my face with her sparkling eyes, as if expecting something.

[Aha.]

I couldn’t help but laugh.

I couldn’t resist, nor did I want to.

Without suppressing the ticklish feeling in my chest, I spread my arms wide and pulled Seo-yul into a hug.

[Oh my, Seo-yul, you look so cute!]

“Hehehe.”

Seo-yul giggled brightly and snuggled into my arms.

Behind her, her colorful wings fluttered like a puppy wagging its tail.

‘Those wings are really fascinating.’

There weren’t any holes cut out in the clothes for the wings.

I had learned recently that the wings of a fairy weren’t made of physical material.

They could take on a physical form, but at times like this, they resembled a shimmering magical energy.

Thanks to that, they could flutter without damaging the clothes.

It was a relief. Otherwise, I’d have had to make clothes with wing holes, which would have been a hassle.

I also put on my outfit. A simple black t-shirt, some pants, and a jacket thrown over it…

[Seo-yul, did you pack everything you need?]

“Yes, yes, yes!”

Seo-yul nodded confidently, thumping her chest.

[Well done.]

As we reached the front door, Seo-yul couldn’t hide her excitement and anticipation, bouncing on her feet. It was so adorable.

‘Maybe I should have taken her out sooner… ’

I smiled wryly to myself.

Looking back, it felt like I had always made excuses, claiming I didn’t have enough time.

If I had worked a little harder, maybe I could have found more time to spend with Seo-yul.

[Oh no, your hair is getting messy.]

I gently smoothed out her slightly disheveled hair and placed a white sunhat on her head.

The wide-brimmed white hat, with a light blue ribbon around it, added a fresh touch to her look.

[Hmm.]

It suited her perfectly. From head to toe, Seo-yul, dressed all in white, truly looked like a fairy.

[Alright, let's go.]

I held Seo-yul's hand and stepped out the front door.

To be honest, even though I said we were going out, I wasn't entirely confident about leading her around.

Though Seo-yul had grown rapidly, she was still a child at heart, and I, her guardian, was practically a shut-in with little experience wandering around outside…

Frankly speaking, I wasn't sure I was up to the task of guiding her.

But fortunately, I had reinforcements.

In the center of the commercial district, there was a ten-story fountain made of elegant white bricks.

Leaning against the wall of a nearby building, staring at a hologram, was Baek Ahrin.

Since I was taking Seo-yul out for a stroll, I also planned to buy materials for equipment crafting.

I had asked Baek Ahrin for help with the crafting process, and when I mentioned I was going to get the materials today, she had offered to come along.

It would have been nice if others could join us, but everyone was busy.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia both had other things to do.

Liana was probably buried in records from the entrance ceremony, and my teacher…

'……'

She had been avoiding me for some reason since last time.

I didn't cling to her, asking why she was avoiding me with teary eyes.

After all, the euphoria had worn off, and I had realized how embarrassing my actions had been…

Honestly, I was relieved that things had only become slightly awkward.

I was terrified that it might stay awkward forever, but I trusted my teacher and couldn't show any signs of that in front of Seo-yul.

In any case, because of all that, I had decided to rely on Baek Ahrin to help me with Seo-yul's outing and getting the crafting materials.

[Baek Ahrin-nim.]

I waved my arm as I approached Baek Ahrin.

She, still focused on the hologram, turned her head toward us.

"?"

[Sorry for being late.]

"…Oh, Hayul-ssi. You're here?"

She blinked a few times, looking back and forth between me and Seo-yul, who was holding my hand.

After tilting her head for a moment, Baek Ahrin suddenly let out a small exclamation, her expression turning slightly odd.

I tilted my head in response.

[Is something wrong? Is there a problem…?]

"No, it's not a problem."

Baek Ahrin shrugged and raised one hand.

On her slender index finger was a ring I hadn't seen before.

It had a silver band with a radiant green gemstone.

"I'm wearing a ring with a perception-blocking spell, but someone recognized me, so I was a bit surprised."

'Ah.'

The gemstone had a perception-blocking spell engraved on it. And it was still active, even now.

I understood why Baek Ahrin had reacted that way.

Since we hadn't registered each other as exceptions, she must have been startled when I recognized her immediately.

"Did you find me using your sensing ability?"

Baek Ahrin, now with her expression back to normal, asked with a curious

glint in her eyes.

[Yes, thanks to my sensing ability.]

“Wow… Just how precise does your sensing ability have to be to break through a perception-blocking spell?”

[Aha…]

Baek Ahrin let out a soft exclamation. Her eyes were wide with genuine amazement, not exaggeration.

I scratched my head awkwardly, feeling a bit embarrassed.

‘I made a mistake. I’ll have to be more careful next time.’

The Power of Observation could see through perception-blocking spells and recognize the true form. It had been the same back when I had spatial awareness, and I had grown too used to it.

Even without using the Power of Observation, I could distinguish people just by sensing their mana.

“So, can you also sense what I’m wearing?”

While I was reflecting on my mistake, Baek Ahrin grinned and asked, stretching her shoulders and standing up straight.

At her question, I observed Baek Ahrin again.

She was dressed casually.

She wore black sweatpants with white stripes running horizontally across them.

On top, she had a black sleeveless shirt with a windbreaker zipped all the way up.

She also wore a mask pulled down to her chin and a baseball cap pulled low over her head.

Interestingly, she was dressed entirely in black today.

“How do I look? It’s a bit casual, but I matched the colors and brands. Does it look alright?”

[Yes.]

[It suits you very well.]

Though it was a simple and casual outfit, her figure was so striking that it looked high-class.

Baek Ahrin was the kind of beauty who could make even famous actors, celebrities, or models look plain by comparison.

As they say, the face completes the outfit. Honestly, with her body and face, even if she wore a sack, she’d still look stylish.

Moreover, the unified color scheme gave her outfit a sense of cohesion, so it didn’t look random at all.

“Hehe, thank you.”

Satisfied with my response, Baek Ahrin chuckled softly.

– Squeeze… Squeeze…

“……”

[Hmm? Seo-yul? What’s wrong?]

It was then.

Seo-yul tugged on my right sleeve.

Her cheeks were puffed out slightly in a clear display of dissatisfaction. Feeling a bit flustered by her obvious displeasure, I gently tried to soothe her.

“This must be Seo-yul, right? Since I haven’t registered her as an exception, she looks like someone else.”

[Ah, just a moment.]

Both Seo-yul and I were also wearing perception-blocking artifacts. Mine was in the form of a necklace, and Seo-yul’s was a bracelet.

The perception-blocking spell was already a high-level magic, but if you put more effort into it, you could add several options.

One of those options was the exception registration, which allowed specific individuals to be excluded from the effects of the spell.

After a moment, I completed the exception registration.

In the Power of Observation, the thin field that had been covering the three of us shifted slightly.

“Wow, Seo-yul is all dressed up too. Haha, look at that big hat.”

Baek Ahrin, now able to see Seo-yul, crouched down to meet her eye level.

“Hello? Do you remember meeting me last time? I even gave you some candy.”

“…Yes, I remember.”

“Oh, that’s great. Did you enjoy the candy?”

“…No, not really.”

“Eh.”

Seo-yul responded in a clear, yet slightly awkward and guarded voice, before

clinging to my leg like a cicada.

Oh my, how adorable.

I couldn't help but reach out and gently pat her on the head, causing her tense expression to slowly melt away.

"Haha. Still a bit shy, huh?"

Baek Ahrin chuckled softly at Seo-yul's behavior and stood up.

As she straightened her legs, her tall figure suddenly loomed right in front of my face.

I flinched slightly as her body passed by so close.

"Why are you startled, Hayul-ssi?"

[Huh?]

[I wasn't startled.]

– Clunk.

"Hmm…? I'll let it slide this time. Shall we start walking?"

[Yes, sounds good.]

With that, Baek Ahrin nodded and naturally reached out to grab my left hand.

It was the one with the Proof of Protection… the prosthetic arm.

Even though I was wearing a sleeve over it, it wasn't exactly pleasant to the touch, but Baek Ahrin didn't seem to mind at all as she led the way.

"It's still early in the morning. Have you eaten yet?"

[No, I just gave Seo-yul a light meal before coming out.]

“I haven’t eaten either. How about we show Seo-yul around a bit, then grab something to eat? Oh, do you remember the rice cake shop I mentioned last time?”

[Rice cake shop…?]

[Ah, yes, I remember.]

“Yes, yes. Last time, it was unfortunately closed, but it’s open again now. Shall we go there?”

[I’m fine with that.]

On my left was Baek Ahrin, and on my right was Seo-yul…

Walking side by side like this, we made quite the unique sight.

Baek Ahrin, the tallest, was dressed in black with blue hair.

In the middle, I wore black clothes with white hair.

And Seo-yul, the shortest, was dressed in white with white hair.

The gradual decrease in height from left to right made me chuckle a bit.

“……”

– Squeeze…

For some reason, Seo-yul, who had become pouty again, squeezed my hand tightly.

CHAPTER 191
OUTING (2)

The rice cake shop I visited for the first time in my life had a traditional Korean house-style structure.

The frame was made of wood, the walls were finished with pristine white hanji paper, and the ceiling was beautifully adorned with blue-green roof tiles, giving the appearance of a fully tiled house.

Surprisingly, they rented out the entire tiled house.

I was startled by such an absurd statement and tried to pull Baek Ahrin away, but she insisted that we should go inside since we were already here, and dragged me in.

According to the smiling employee who saw us, this place was quite a famous brand.

Come to think of it, it wasn't such a strange thing to say. Not only was it located within Shio-ram, but judging by the large plot of land it occupied, it was clearly a well-known establishment.

'Even rice cake shops have brands now.'

I found it oddly fascinating. It might sound a bit old-fashioned, but in my mind, a rice cake shop was synonymous with a mill.

"The interior is quite nice too."

Baek Ahrin, who had carefully examined the exterior and interior on our way to the private room, nodded approvingly.

"The floor is of good material, so you could sit directly on it… But since we

have cushions, we might as well use them."

Then she retrieved the luxurious purple cushion she had set aside earlier and sat down on it.

"As expected, no matter how big your bottom is, a soft cushion is always more comfortable than the bare floor."

[Yes.]

[Yes?]

[What do you mean?]

I responded reflexively while seating Seo-yul on the cushion, but I felt like something was off.

"What? My bottom, of course."

Baek Ahrin tilted her head as if wondering why I was confused, even tapping her hips with her palm.

"Especially during dungeon raids or expeditions. Unless the place is well-prepared and fortified, we often have to sit or lie down on hard ground during exploration missions or expeditions."

[Yes, that's true.]

"Every time that happens, I'm grateful for having a big bottom. While others complain about their tailbones hurting, I manage to endure thanks to the cushioning effect of my fat."

Baek Ahrin explained, wiggling her fingers.

As the successor of the Changhae clan, some might assume she had grown up pampered, but in fact, Baek Ahrin had been accompanying her family elders on expeditions since she was young.

It was only natural that she had such experiences.

“Of course, it’s still not as comfortable as a soft cushion.”

As she finished with a grumble, I unconsciously observed her lower body.

A waist as thin as an ant’s contrasted with wide hips. Even without looking inside, the plumpness of her buttocks was apparent through her tracksuit.

[Uh… Yeah, that makes sense…]

It certainly seemed like sitting on the ground wouldn’t hurt much.

“Right?”

Baek Ahrin grinned mischievously.

Although her words initially sounded a bit suggestive, upon reflection, there didn’t seem to be anything inappropriate about them.

I responded awkwardly and sat down on my cushion.

Soon, steaming rice cakes were served in various dishes.

‘There are so many kinds… ’

I was slightly overwhelmed by the sheer variety of rice cakes, more than I had expected.

There were names like Duteop-tteok, Mangyeong-tteok, and Mesak-tteok… The employee explained the ingredients and the regions where each rice cake was made.

“Shall we eat?”

[Yes, let’s eat.]

There were so many options that it was hard to decide where to start, but for

someone like me, whose sense of taste and smell was practically dead, it didn't matter much.

What mattered was the texture.

I selected a few types of rice cakes, placed them on a small plate, and cut them into bite-sized pieces with scissors.

These were for Seo-yul to eat.

In my mind, she was still a baby who needed a bottle, but in reality, she was already adept at using chopsticks and even chewing meat on her own.

After staring intently at the rice cakes on her plate for a moment, Seo-yul made her choice.

She picked the sweet potato rice cake.

"Nom."

Her mouth closed tightly. After chewing for a while, Seo-yul's eyes widened.

[How is it? Is it good?]

"…Yes, it's delicious."

Seo-yul blinked and answered as she swallowed the rice cake. She had enjoyed the sweet potato snacks I made for her before, and it seemed the sweet potato rice cake suited her taste as well.

Seo-yul was not a picky eater to begin with. She ate meat well, and she had no problem with fruits and vegetables either.

Her only real aversion was to one thing.

Eggs.

When she was first introduced to solid foods, I had tried feeding her a bit of

boiled egg yolk…

– “Waaaah!”

– [Se-Seo-yul…?]

– “I don’t like eggs! I won’t eat them!”

That day, I witnessed Seo-yul throw her biggest tantrum ever.

The usually calm and angelic Seo-yul had thrown herself on the floor, flailing her arms and legs in protest. It was a shock to see.

I couldn’t understand why a child who ate all her vegetables without complaint would react so violently to eggs.

I thought it was just chicken eggs, but when I showed her quail eggs, she had the same reaction.

Yet, she liked chicken meat…

It was an inexplicable hatred for eggs.

Had she forgotten that she was born from an egg, like a hero from a founding myth?

“But still…”

[Hmm?]

“But still, the food Dad makes is much tastier.”

While I was reminiscing, Seo-yul, who had been chewing her rice cake, suddenly looked up at me and said.

[Ahaha.]

[Seo-yul, that makes me so happy!]

I felt a surge of emotion.

Whether or not Seo-yul actually liked my cooking didn't matter.

What mattered was her kind heart for saying such sweet words.

[Who taught you to say such lovely things, huh?]

"Heehee! Daddy taught me!"

I spread my arms and hugged Seo-yul, who was sitting next to me. She giggled and rubbed her cheek against mine.

After filling our stomachs, we wandered around the commercial district.

We were headed to a facility to purchase the materials that were the main purpose of this outing, while also letting Seo-yul, who was still holding my hand tightly, see the sights.

I also kept an eye on our surroundings through my observation.

[There seem to be a lot of cadets out today.]

The necklace around my neck expressed its thoughts.

It wasn't unusual for the commercial district to be crowded, but what was odd was the unusually high number of cadets among the visitors today.

"It's because the tower entrance exam just ended yesterday. Everyone's probably out to relieve some stress."

[Ah.]

After hearing Baek Ahrin's explanation and reviewing the information from my observation, I noticed that most of the cadets were first and second years.

I hadn't thought much of it since I had been released on Thursday, but

everyone else had been dismissed on Friday night.

With the major event over, they must have rushed out to have fun with their friends.

Now that I thought about it, Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia, who had said they had things to do, might also be out with their friends.

[…Baek Ahrin, are you really okay spending time with me like this?]

“Huh? Why do you ask all of a sudden?”

[You’ve been helping me out instead of resting or hanging out with your friends…]

While other cadets were out having fun, Baek Ahrin was spending her time with Seo-yul and me, possibly wasting her day.

“Pfft, I’m resting and having fun right now.”

[Huh?]

“We ate together, and now we’re walking around holding hands… Isn’t this resting and having fun?”

When I asked, Baek Ahrin shrugged as if wondering what I was talking about, then shook our clasped hands.

[Uh… Well…]

[Thank you for saying that.]

“I’m enjoying myself, so there’s no need to thank me.”

She smiled brightly as she spoke, and I subtly turned my face away.

For some reason, my heart felt ticklish.

[Um… Let's go buy the materials first.]

I squeezed Seo-yul's small hand, which was pressing into the stiff fingers of my prosthetic hand, and led the way to our destination.

I ignored Baek Ahrin's giggles from behind.

The commercial district had plenty of convenience and entertainment facilities, but there were also many shops selling materials used in alchemy, metallurgy, and other crafting activities.

I had never set foot in such places before, but today I did.

[Hmm…]

I stroked my chin as I observed the products on the nearby shelves.

We were on the second floor, where metallurgy materials were displayed.

As a result, most of the items on the shelves were ingots.

There were also tools like hammers, as well as various catalysts in all sorts of containers.

"They've got everything."

Baek Ahrin, who was looking around at the products next to me, commented.

Just as she said, they had everything.

And the quality was top-notch.

As expected of a store certified by Shio-ram, there was no funny business with the products.

Seo-yul, still holding my hand, was also curiously inspecting the items here and there.

I passed by the ingots. I had already gathered the main materials and could get more if needed.

What I needed were catalysts and supplementary materials.

I moved toward the shelf where those items were displayed, and the employee who had been following us since the entrance silently followed along.

The shelf was filled with all sorts of supplementary materials, taking up almost the entire wall.

There were raw herbs, finely ground powders that shimmered, and liquids neatly divided into small glass bottles.

I checked the price tags.

A single catalyst, barely the size of a finger, had a price starting with a 7, followed by a string of zeros…

Even though I had grown accustomed to the prices in this world and had earned a considerable fortune through rewards and other means, the numbers still made me wince.

And yet, an entire section of the wall was lined with such products.

I did some mental calculations.

The task I needed to perform, the necessary materials, and the additional materials I might need…

[Excuse me, employee?]

I finished my calculations and called the employee standing behind me.

“Yes, how can I assist you?”

The employee responded with a polite smile.

‘I never thought I’d do this in real life.’

With an awkward smile, I raised my hand and pointed to the leftmost shelf.

[From here…]

I extended my hand all the way to the rightmost shelf.

[To here, I’ll take it all.]

“Excuse me?”

A question mark appeared above the employee’s head.

It wasn’t a surprising reaction.

Even a single catalyst was expensive, and purchasing them in large quantities would be a burden for most people.

But here I was, asking for enough to fill an entire wall. It was an extravagant request that most would find impossible.

Even with the hefty rewards I had earned from resolving the Shipnaha and China incidents, it was still a considerable expense for me.

But…

‘Special admission students at Shio-ram are invincible… ’

I pulled out the card the vice principal had given me last time.

That day, I purchased the entire stock with a 30% discount plus an additional 65% discount.

My wallet felt a little lighter.

CHAPTER 192
COOLING DOWN (1)

[Balance: 232,103……]

“Oh…”

The next day.

I stared at the dwindling balance in my bank account. The zeros hadn’t disappeared, but the first number had dropped a bit.

It was because I had gone on a shopping spree in the commercial district yesterday, buying materials in bulk. How many stores did I visit in total? About eight, I think? Honestly, I pretty much swept up all the sub-materials that were put up for sale at each store.

There were even a few people who witnessed the bulk purchase, and now there’s talk in the community about some cadet throwing money around in the commercial district.

“Hmm…”

I wiggled my fingers as I calculated the remaining balance in my account.

Most of the balance in my account came from the rewards I received from the Association.

One reward was for resolving the Shipnaha chain dungeon rampage, and the other was for subjugating the Twin-headed Venom Dragon.

Both incidents were major events that shook the world. If the initial response hadn’t been quick, they wouldn’t have ended as mere disturbances but as full-blown disasters.

And I was the one who managed the initial suppression of both incidents.

In Shipnaha, I prevented the rampage by killing the alpha entity, Aerulus, which acted as the core of the runaway dungeon.

In China, I stopped the rampage by killing the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, which could have led to a massive undead rampage and dungeon chain reaction.

Thanks to that, I received a hefty reward. I still vividly remember my jaw dropping when I saw the balance in my account.

Even though the cost of living in this world is vastly different from my previous one, I never imagined I'd be handling such large sums of money.

However, the public seemed to view the Twin-headed Venom Dragon incident as a greater disaster, which is why the reward for subjugating the dragon was significantly higher.

Well, it makes sense. The monster in Shipnaha was probably only a 5th-tier alpha at best, while the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, though weakened as an undead, was once a 3rd-tier alpha that spewed poison and disease.

The difference in rank is significant.

But from my perspective, having seen Aerulus, who would later rise to 3rd-tier alpha, it felt like a close call either way.

"Should I be glad I met Aerulus back then…?"

As for other sources of income, it's mostly from selling the byproducts of monsters I killed while wandering around.

Even now, my subspace is filled with monster byproducts I haven't yet disposed of. At first, I planned to sell them all, but after learning necromancy, I repurposed them as teaching materials. I even took back some byproducts that the Association had been storing.

“Still, even with all those discounts, my balance is shrinking…”

I received a 30% discount as a Shio-ram cadet, and an additional 65% discount as a special admission student. That’s a total of 95% off, yet my balance is still this low…

I thought I was getting used to the cost of living in this world, but apparently not.

I bought the materials because I needed them now and would use them constantly in the future, but if I had to pay full price later, I don’t think I could afford it…

– Worried about money? Why would you be?

As I pondered over my dwindling balance, I suddenly recalled the card I received from Hong Yeon-hwa.

The day after the banquet at the Gop-hwa clan.

While we were chatting, she had handed me a shiny, violet card with a puzzled look, wondering why I was even worrying about money.

“……”

After she explained the card’s benefits and usage, I had trembled as I carefully stored it in my subspace. I haven’t taken it out since.

And for good reason… using it felt too shameless.

What have I done to deserve leeching off that card like a parasite? Hong Yeon-hwa had insisted I use it freely, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so…

“But the Shio-ram discount is an exception.”

However, the Shio-ram discount is a different matter. The amount deducted by the discount isn’t covered by the store but by Shio-ram itself.

In the past, I felt uncomfortable using it and didn't take full advantage of it, but that discomfort was slashed away along with me during my second run through The Tower.

"Damn it, how could they send me into the tower like that?"

They even left the pain receptors on.

Even now, I grit my teeth. I've already submitted a request for a meeting to ask about The Tower of Knowledge and to protest their recent actions.

The Master of The Tower of Growth, or maybe the Vice Principal beneath them… they're all insane.

Of course, I could have given up and escaped halfway, and they did provide an emergency exit… but crazy is still crazy.

I grimaced as I stood up.

The layout of Shio-ram's facilities is quite systematic.

At the center, where The Tower of Growth stands, are the central administration of Shio-ram, management institutions, and the commercial district.

From the central plaza, main roads stretch out in the four cardinal directions, marking the boundaries of the living quarters for first to fourth-year students.

Training and major-specific facilities are also clustered together rather than scattered around.

Thanks to this, when you calmly observe Shio-ram's grounds, each area reveals its own distinct characteristics.

"Hmm…"

The production major area I visited this time immediately brought to mind the word “industrial complex.”

Buildings with no windows or covered by curtains, low-rise structures, and large, thick iron doors.

Chimneys rose from the rooftops, puffing out white smoke.

“It really looks like an industrial complex. Low-rise buildings, no windows, thick iron doors, and chimneys…”

A voice echoed the same sentiment right next to me.

It was Baek Ahrin, dressed almost exactly as she had been yesterday.

She had come along to help with today’s task and was glancing around with her hands clasped behind her back, sharing her thoughts.

The only difference from yesterday was that she wasn’t wearing the magic tool that disrupted perception.

As a result, her beauty was fully exposed, and people’s gazes were drawn to her.

“It seems like they’re looking at you, not me.”

…That might be true.

In fact, if I think about where the attention is focused, I probably stand out more than Baek Ahrin.

As I subtly observed my surroundings, I noticed quite a few people turning their heads to glance at me as they walked by.

“Some of them are just staring blankly…”

They were students from the production major. I hadn’t encountered many

students from this department.

After all, I've primarily focused on combat, so I've had more connections with that side. Lately, I've also been attending a lot of magic lectures.

They were all wearing similar work aprons with tools attached.

Judging by their tired expressions and sweat-drenched bodies, they had probably just finished a task.

Their faces were smudged with dust and black stains.

They looked exactly like you'd imagine workers to look.

"So, what will you do now, blacksmith?"

As we walked, Baek Ahrin teased me with a playful question.

Though she said people were staring at me, they were also staring at her, yet she didn't seem bothered at all.

"Hmm… First, let's gather the materials and rent a workshop."

Gathering the main materials and renting a workshop was a breeze.

This was the production major area, after all. There were plenty of stores and storage facilities that handled all kinds of materials.

I visited one of the storage facilities managed directly by Shio-ram, not an external vendor.

Shio-ram provides many benefits to its students.

For production major students, they even provide materials and tools for their projects.

I grabbed as much black iron and other materials as I needed from there.

After that, I just had to pick an empty workshop from the many available nearby and rent it in real-time.

“They really give special admission students premium materials without hesitation… The benefits are impressive.”

Baek Ahrin chuckled as she spoke.

She was probably referring to how I had filled my bag with plenty of materials from the storage facility earlier.

“Yes.”

“I only found out about it recently, too.”

Normally, when a student receives materials or tools from Shio-ram, they have to fill out a form.

It’s a sort of proposal explaining what they plan to make, why they need these materials, how they’ll handle them, and how much they need…

Basically, it’s to ensure that students use the materials responsibly and efficiently, rather than wasting them.

By the way, I skipped that process entirely.

Just by verifying my special admission status, the staff waived the proposal form and let me take as many materials and tools as I wanted.

…I kept thinking of the student who had been staring blankly at me earlier.

They were sitting there, meticulously filling out their form.

Meanwhile, I just flashed my special admission status, waltzed into the storage, and walked out with a mountain of materials and equipment…

In short, being a special admission student is the best.

The support is incredible.

Soon, I'll be receiving more funds, so the amount I spent yesterday will be replenished, right?

I smiled brightly.

But I'll never forgive what happened in the second run.

Sure, I'm a little grateful considering how much I've grown… but still, the Principal is a bastard…

The workshop I rented, located underground, was filled with warm, humid air.

A large furnace on one side of the wall was in a preheating state, its orange glow illuminating the dim interior, giving the place a rather atmospheric feel.

Near the furnace, there were basic tools like a solid anvil.

It seemed to have all the essentials.

"Is it too hot for you?"

Though the furnace was still in the preheating stage, I asked Baek Ahrin, who had followed me into the workshop, if she was uncomfortable.

"Me? No, not at all."

Baek Ahrin, who had been resting her chin on her hand and watching me, tilted her head as if she had heard something strange.

She blinked a few times, then suddenly reached out and grabbed my cheek.

"Huh?"

"So cool…"

Her soft hand gripped my cheek.

Just as I was about to ask what she was doing, a cool sensation spread across my cheek, making me shudder.

Baek Ahrin giggled as she gently squeezed my cheek.

Normally, her cold touch would feel uncomfortable, but in the heat of the furnace, it felt incredibly refreshing…

My body relaxed.

“Thanks to Changhae, I don’t feel any discomfort. Isn’t that why you asked me to come?”

“Yeah… I kind of forgot for a moment.”

Baek Ahrin’s body, enhanced by the Changhae, is specialized in cold energy and water techniques.

Now that I think about it, she can easily dispel this level of heat with Changhae.

That was the whole reason I asked for her help in the first place.

I smiled awkwardly and gently pulled my cheek out of her grasp.

“So, you’re making weapons today?”

“Yes.”

I nodded as Baek Ahrin playfully poked my cheek, as if to say, “How could you forget?”

Today’s goal was to craft equipment.

‘Black Iron Gear.’

I planned to make various weapons using black iron, which is known for its good balance of cost and quality.

In the original story, whenever there were no better options, black iron gear was always a reliable choice.

I had already planned to make or acquire black iron gear.

But meeting my second run self in the tower had solidified that decision.

Especially since the black iron gear made by my second run self was crafted by someone with master-level skills.

I had observed those weapons extensively, gathering information, so I should be able to produce something of even better quality.

'I should also try making magic tools.'

My mana control and magic skills have improved significantly since the beginning of the semester.

This time, I'm thinking of making accessories and engraving magic formulas on them.

Of course, the magic tools will be more of a practice, so I'm not expecting much.

But if they turn out well… I'll give them as gifts to those around me instead of keeping them for myself.

'Hmm.'

After finishing my thoughts, I began releasing my mana.

All of this starts with the process of handling metal.

For the record, I learned metallurgy from the Gop-hwa clan.

In other words, I learned how to handle metal through Gop-hwa techniques.

“So, my role is to help control your Gop-hwa with my Changhae, right?”

“Yes.”

That’s why I asked for Baek Ahrin’s help.

I’ve practiced controlling Gop-hwa for long periods at the Gop-hwa clan, but there’s always the chance it might go out of control.

Also, I can rely on Changhae’s help if things get too intense.

Of course, I could activate Changhae myself, but I wanted to experience Baek Ahrin’s control over Changhae firsthand, so I asked for her assistance.

“You didn’t have to invite me so early, though…”

“Hey, it’s fine. I had nothing else to do anyway, and I can learn by watching you.”

I didn’t expect her to follow me from the very beginning.

Concerned that she might be wasting her time, I asked, but Baek Ahrin just sat down in a chair in the corner, smiling brightly, saying it was fine.

“…Then, I’ll be counting on you.”

I bowed my head slightly.

“Don’t worry. If anything dangerous happens, I’ll protect you.”

In response to my bow, Baek Ahrin clapped her hands together and gave me a kind smile.

Feeling reassured by her smile, I sat down on the workbench.

Sweat began to bead on my body. I rolled up the sleeves of my right arm and

removed the arm guard. Beads of sweat formed on my still unfamiliar, pale skin.

I wiggled my right hand with a strange expression, then activated Gop-hwa for the first time in a while.

– Whoosh…!

“Huh?”

Gop-hwa flared up.

The flames surged outward in a large burst before quickly shrinking back down.

I tilted my head in confusion and waved my right arm, where the flames had ignited.

“…It seems like the output is higher than before…?”

The flames of Gop-hwa flickered and danced.

* * *

[Unique Ability [Mana Affinity] is activated.]

[Expansion Ability [Homogenization: Gop-hwa] is activated.]

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸Mental State

[Trial of Gop-hwa (?)]

CHAPTER 193
COOLING DOWN (2)

-Whoosh!

The furnace was already in a preheated state.

The screen that shielded the flames rattled.

In an instant, the interior of the workshop was bathed in an orange glow, casting shadows before dimming again.

'Powdered coal and ground mana stone dust… and some kind of reagent?'

He observed the inside of the furnace.

The bottom was filled with burning coal. The finely ground mana stone dust and reagent were evenly mixed between the coals, guiding the nature of the flames.

It seemed this was the basic setup, given that the furnace was already preheated.

'Well then.'

He opened the screen after sitting down on a nearby chair.

-Whoosh!

As soon as the screen was lifted, a gust of hot air rushed out. His hair and clothes fluttered, and the hot air seeped through the collar of his shirt.

He didn't feel the heat at all. After all, he had already activated his Gop-hwa. He wasn't about to feel hot from mere flames like these.

At most, his skin warmed slightly, and a few beads of sweat began to form. Even that was just a basic physiological reaction.

‘Baek Ahrin… ’

He glanced at Baek Ahrin, who was sitting nearby, to see if she was affected by the heated workshop.

Despite what she had said earlier, he wondered if she might have been influenced by the heat. But when he observed her, she was sitting with her legs crossed, maintaining a calm demeanor.

Even in the sweltering workshop, not a single bead of sweat formed on her. Upon closer inspection, he could sense the cold energy that filled her body. It seemed she had amplified her mana to block out the heat even more than usual.

‘Looks like I really don’t need to worry.’

Feeling reassured once again, he checked the state of his Gop-hwa one last time.

Earlier, it had felt like the output was slightly off, but now that he was controlling it, it had returned to normal.

Even with a detailed observation, there were no particular abnormalities. The Gop-hwa was always a temperamental power, so its erratic nature wasn’t unusual.

He stretched his hand toward the furnace. Soon, the flickering flames engulfed his hand.

A normal person would have recoiled in shock, but he calmly caressed the flames.

-Whoosh!

The Gop-hwa, which had been burning on his right arm, transferred into the furnace. It consumed the coal, mana stone dust, reagent, and even the flames that were already burning, growing in size.

'Calm your emotions, focus… '

Considering the output of the Gop-hwa, it could easily burn down not just the furnace but the entire workshop in an instant. That's why it needed to be carefully controlled.

He adjusted the Gop-hwa so that it wouldn't burn through the furnace. He pressed it down, ensuring it didn't spread to unintended areas.

He also kept a firm grip on his mental state.

As his emotions gradually heightened, his patience and self-control began to wane, and he felt the urge to act impulsively. He suppressed those feelings.

The most important lesson taught in the Gop-hwa clan was emotional control.

He had absorbed nearly 200 years of accumulated knowledge in a short crash course. It wasn't difficult.

The once ferocious Gop-hwa slowly settled onto the furnace.

Maintaining control, he withdrew his hand. He observed the state of the Gop-hwa for a while. The flames, now docile like a puppy, flickered quietly. There was no sign of it burning through the furnace.

'Done.'

With that, the preparations were complete. Nodding in satisfaction, he grabbed the black iron ingot he had prepared earlier.

He pushed the hand holding the black iron ingot into the furnace.

Since it was his own Gop-hwa, he could withstand most flames with his bare body.

-Whoosh… The Gop-hwa, which had been clinging to the furnace, stirred.

The flickering flames began to strike the black iron ingot.

The dark metal gradually heated up.

He adjusted the output of the Gop-hwa so that it wouldn't melt or burn the black iron.

Just as the ingot began to soften, he withdrew his hand.

The ingot, now glowing white-hot, shimmered. He placed it on the anvil and picked up a hammer.

-Clang!

The hammer struck down on the ingot. With a clear sound, sparks flew.

-Clang!

He struck it again. The shape of the ingot began to change. He continued to hammer the soft metal, straightening it out.

Even though there were various tools available, he insisted on sitting in front of the furnace, hammering the ingot himself.

Many technologies were lost during the Great Cataclysm and the ensuing period of chaos.

Inventions that had been realized through technology were destroyed, and the inventors themselves perished. Their records were lost as well.

Even in this world, where magic and the Towers had filled in the gaps, mechanical devices still existed.

-Clang!

Even right beside him, there were tools other than the crude anvil and hammer.

There was a pneumatic hammer that could strike the metal on its own once it was secured, and a grinder that could polish the surface. There were many auxiliary devices powered by mana.

‘Most mass-produced weapons are made in factories, anyway.’

There were two main types of mass-produced weapons on the market.

One was handmade weapons crafted by novice blacksmiths who hadn’t yet mastered their craft, trying to recoup some of their investment.

The other was factory-made weapons, produced by mana-powered machinery that stamped them out with precision.

No matter how superhuman one might be, it was impossible to produce weapons without rest.

However, weapons produced in factories were still being supplied to the market in large quantities, relatively cheaply.

In other words, they were cost-effective products.

Superhumans who lacked funds or support often relied on these cost-effective factory-made weapons.

They weren’t unusable after just one or two uses, and most weapons were consumables anyway.

If you purchased products from a large brand, the price and quality were reasonable, so even if they broke, you could replace them without much burden.

For these reasons, most mass-produced weapons were factory-made.

-Clang! Clang!

However, on the other hand, nearly all high-end weapons were handmade.

It wasn't that people overvalued the fact that they were made by hand; the performance of handmade weapons was simply far superior.

-Clang!

The hammer came down again.

-Clang!

The mana infused into the hammer struck the ingot. The mana gradually seeped into the reshaping metal.

After finishing one ingot, he picked up a new one. He dipped it into a catalyst, soaking it, then placed it into the furnace and infused it with Gop-hwa.

Once the ingot was heated, he placed it on the anvil, sprinkled it with reagents, and continued hammering.

-Clang! Clang! Clang!

Mana mixed into the ingot. The Gop-hwa seeped in, and the catalyst and reagents were added.

And…

Clang! He infused the hammering with his own unique essence.

'Indeed… '

In this world, uniqueness was incredibly important.

If even one of the countless unique traits stood out, it could grant abilities

that defied common sense.

When someone with such a unique trait painstakingly crafted something themselves, it would be imbued with a special quality.

“Just become famous, and no matter what you do, people will applaud you.”

It was a saying that rang true.

Setting aside technical skill, the results of a creation made by an ordinary person and one made by someone with a unique trait were completely different.

It was a common understanding in this world.

-Clang…

He stopped hammering. His fingers, which had grown stiff, twitched slightly.

Some time had passed.

On the anvil lay a pitch-black sword.

Its appearance was plain and unremarkable, with no distinguishing features. From the handle to the tip, it was a solid piece of black iron.

He examined the sword, which had consumed several ingots, reagents, and catalysts in its creation.

‘Hmm… ’

He made a strange expression.

He wasn’t dissatisfied with the quality. He could have done better, but it met the minimum standard. It was good enough to be used, so he stored it in his subspace for future use.

However, unintentionally, it looked almost identical to the sword he had

wielded in his second life.

'…No, that's only natural.'

The momentary awkwardness he felt quickly passed as he reconsidered.

It wasn't strange at all.

The design was always meant to be simple, and he had deliberately crafted it to resemble the sword from his second life. The fact that the appearance was similar was only to be expected.

"Oh…"

At that moment, a presence approached.

"Wow, how did you manage to make something like this in such a short time?"

It was Baek Ahrin, who had been sitting behind him.

She walked over gracefully and knelt beside him.

Her sparkling blue eyes reflected the freshly forged black iron sword.

[Hehe.]

At her reaction, he straightened his shoulders slightly.

A sense of pride welled up within him, knowing he had made something worthwhile. The emotional high from using Gop-hwa added to the satisfaction, making him feel quite pleased.

And then…

"With this level of quality, you could be considered a master in the technical field… Hayul, you're not just skilled in one area, but truly versatile—"

While hammering vigorously in front of the furnace, feeling the heat on his face, Baek Ahrin's cool breath brushed against his ear.

[Ugh…!]

"Gah—! Cough! Cough!"

"Hayul!?"

His body convulsed, springing upright like a coiled spring, as dizziness spread through his limbs.

He had been hammering away at the black iron ingot, crafting weapons in bulk.

He had forged a variety of swords, spears, staffs, shields, hammers, blunt weapons, axes… He even made unique weapons like meteor hammers and chain whips, similar to those he had used in his second life.

He had worried that crafting each weapon might take too long, but it turned out to be easier than expected, allowing him to mass-produce them quickly.

The weapons were finished.

'Next is… '

"Hayul~ I'm sorry, please forgive me~"

Just as he was about to move on to the next step, a playful voice came from behind, and he pouted slightly.

As expected, Baek Ahrin was poking his shoulder repeatedly with a mischievous smile on her face.

[I'm not mad.]

"I didn't expect you to be so startled. I thought for sure you'd notice, given

that you said you were using your sensory abilities. It was my mistake, I apologize."

[No,]

[It was my mistake, so there's no need for you to apologize.]

[And I'm not mad.]

Mad? Him? That was absurd. He had no reason to be upset.

Of course, he had been startled by Baek Ahrin and jumped up, screaming, even experiencing the Curse of Silence for the first time in a while… but he wasn't mad.

Why did she keep making him out to be someone who would hold a grudge over something so trivial?

"Hmm…"

As he continued to deny it, Baek Ahrin made a strange humming noise.

What was with that unsettling reaction?

"Then how about we do this?"

[…What?]

"Since we both made mistakes, let's call it even and forget about it."

[?]

Call it even?

He tilted his head in confusion, his wariness growing, as Baek Ahrin smirked and pointed to herself.

More specifically, she pointed to her chest, which was wrapped in a

windbreaker.

“Remember when you came back with horns on your forehead? You were all over my chest—”

[Ahhh!]

The Necklace of Confession rattled violently.

A memory he desperately wanted to forget resurfaced.

He shot up with such force that he nearly hit the ceiling, rushing toward Baek Ahrin.

[Okay! Okay!]

[It was my fault…!]

[So please, stop!]

“Yes, yes, I accept. Let’s forgive each other~”

…Finally, he received forgiveness for the trouble he had caused last time.

“Are you going to make magic tools next?”

[Yes…]

After receiving Baek Ahrin’s playful care, he slumped his shoulders and responded.

The next step after forging the black iron weapons was crafting accessories—specifically, magic tools.

Magic tools, simply put, were tools inscribed with spells.

For example, if you inscribed a shockwave spell on a rock, that rock would become a magic tool.

Of course, it wouldn't be a proper magic tool.

The weaker and more fragile the base material, the harder it is to inscribe spells. Even if you manage to inscribe one, the object would break after only a few uses.

That's why the base material must be strong and durable enough to withstand and activate the spell—in other words, it has to be expensive and sturdy.

Even then, it's not permanent.

No matter how sturdy the base material, the spell will wear out over time.

Also, since the spell was artificially inscribed, external impacts could easily damage it.

That's why most weapons don't have spells inscribed on them. It takes a lot of effort, time, and money to inscribe a spell, and it can be destroyed after just a few clashes.

Even if you make a magic tool, maintaining it is essential for continued use. No matter how carefully you maintain it, it will eventually reach its limit.

'That's why artifacts are so valuable.'

Artifacts are permanent.

They aren't artificially inscribed with spells but possess inherent unique traits.

No matter how many clashes they endure, their effects won't disappear, and even if they break, there's a chance they can be restored.

'An artificial artifact… With my mana affinity, I might be able to create one someday.'

He didn’t expect to be able to make one right away.

But the possibility was high. Now that he had completed the black iron weapons as planned, he thought he could practice creating one in his spare time.

‘For now, I’ll go with a basic spell, like a protective barrier.’

Usually, the crafting of a magic tool is done in two steps: first, creating the base material, and then inscribing the spell.

But this time, he intended to do both simultaneously.

Swoosh! The Wings of the Sky spread apart.

Like a peacock fanning its feathers, the countless strands of the Wings of the Sky sharpened to a point like needles.

He extracted mana and channeled it into the Wings of the Sky. Soon, mana gathered at the sharp tips.

…It looked somewhat like a tentacle monster, but this method was efficient.

“That artifact is really something. The Wings of the Sky, right? I heard it’s registered as mid-high grade… but now it seems like it’s reached the top tier.”

[It’s a good match for me.]

After briefly responding to Baek Ahrin, who was admiring the artifact, he refocused his attention.

Earlier, his concentration had been disrupted by the side effects of Gop-hwa, but thanks to Baek Ahrin’s help, he had calmed down considerably.

Still, since quite a bit of time had passed, he decided to make just a few more and then head back.

With that thought, he picked up a silver ingot to use as the base material.

He had gold ingots as well, but it seemed wasteful to use them for practice, so he opted for the cheaper silver.

'Let's start with a ring… '

He activated the Gop-hwa from his right arm.

-Whoosh!

The darkened room was suddenly bathed in a red glow.

His mind instantly quieted.

An inexplicable scene came into focus.

-You bastard, what now!? Are you insane? What's with the sudden outburst!?

A furious Lee Ji-yeon was pounding her chest, venting her frustration.

And…

-Didn't you know I had bipolar disorder when you followed me? If you're pissed, just get lost.

A man with a rebellious expression, waving his hand dismissively, as if telling her to go away. His features were uncannily similar to his own.

CHAPTER 194
COOLING DOWN (3)

While hammering to form the basic body, the process of engraving the technique with the sharp feather of the sky was underway.

Everything proceeded without any issues. Although it required a lot of concentration, there were no mistakes along the way.

The appearance of the ring that was made had a simple elegance, resembling the color and form of porcelain.

As he nodded in satisfaction at the desired performance being well-embedded,

'What the hell is this?'

Gop-hwa began showing abnormal signs.

-Whoosh!

Suddenly, Gop-hwa swelled greatly. It expanded in an instant, as if it were about to explode, and began to surge.

He barely managed to control the Gop-hwa before it spread in all directions, preventing it from scorching the surroundings.

He quickly redirected the flames away from Baek Ahrin and grabbed his right arm as he stood up.

His face twisted at the abnormal phenomenon.

This damn ability was going wild. It had been sitting quietly like a tame puppy during the crafting process, but now it was acting like a rabid dog,

trying to bite everything around.

'…No, is it not trying to burn the outside?'

He sensed something off.

Although he had caught the flames before they could spread, they weren't as threatening as they seemed.

The flames roared, causing the temperature in the workshop to rise dramatically. The heat was so intense that sweat poured down his skin like rain.

However, even if he hadn't grabbed hold of the Gop-hwa, it wouldn't have caused significant damage to the outside.

-Whoosh!

Instead, inside… the seed of Gop-hwa that had sprouted within him began to swell.

The flames clung to his emotions.

'Grr…!'

Thump! His pulse pounded loudly. The vibration rattled his bones, and he curled up.

For a moment, his mind became clouded, as if it were covered by flames and black smoke. His consciousness flickered.

Gop-hwa latched onto his emotions.

His emotions surged. It wasn't an unusual phenomenon. This was a typical side effect of Gop-hwa.

Gop-hwa could use many things as fuel, but it fed especially well on the

emotions of its wielder.

To further stoke the flames, Gop-hwa would incite the wielder's emotions, piling up fuel to produce greater power.

He had experienced this many times before and had endured it. He had never suffered serious harm from this side effect.

When it had first manifested in The Tower of Growth, he had only briefly entertained negative thoughts, and afterward, he had managed to use it with careful control.

'But this… '

This time, it was different.

The flames were fierce. The surge of emotions was unusual. The fire wasn't subsiding easily.

And then…

-Aaaaaah…!

A vision replayed in his mind.

Blond hair and blue eyes. The neck of a common Western man was torn apart.

A monster that bit into the man's neck… The Red Leaf Hound chewed on the flesh, savoring it.

The scream ceased. Blood gushed like a waterfall, and soon the man's bloodshot eyes rolled back. His staggering body collapsed into the pool of blood.

He didn't know who the man was.

No, to be precise, he had seen him before.

The man was someone he had failed to save by a narrow margin in Shipnaha.

In the vision, his own face twisted horribly.

Back when his hair was still black and his mana was blue. He clenched his teeth and charged at the Red Leaf Hound.

His fist slammed down. Boom! His punch, enveloped in Qi, smashed the Red Leaf Hound's head.

The hound's shattered body collapsed onto the man's corpse.

The culprit was dead.

But the murdered man did not come back.

At that time, such a scene had been vividly imprinted in Lee Hayul's spatial perception.

From Shipnaha to the present.

He had saved many people. There were those whose lives he had barely managed to save by jumping in at the last moment.

But there were also many he couldn't save. Faces of those he could have saved if he had been just a step faster flashed through his mind.

People who died because of him. People who would have survived if he hadn't recklessly intervened in China. People who died because of the excuse that it was necessary to prevent even greater future damage…

'Ugh… '

His breath hitched. His lungs and heart momentarily hardened like stone.

The guilt he had buried deep inside suddenly resurfaced. A considerable

chunk of guilt floated up, and Gop-hwa latched onto it, having found excellent fuel.

As if it had seized on his weakness, Gop-hwa flared up violently. More visions surfaced, becoming fuel for the fire.

That kind of guilt weighed heavily on his body and mind. Normally, he would rationalize it away with some flimsy excuse, but his reason, swept up by emotion, found it hard to do so.

'What is this… '

Mixed in with the visions were some inexplicable scenes, making it even harder to think clearly. Faces that resembled his own but weren't him…

-Whoosh…! The flames grew fiercer.

His body jerked violently.

'No, before that, I need to deal with Gop-hwa… '

The momentum of Gop-hwa showed no signs of stopping, and the heat accumulated in his body.

His emotions swelled, pushing his reason aside.

The heat inside him intensified. At this rate, his body felt like it was going to explode.

Whether he burst or burned, it was clear that he wouldn't end up in one piece. If he let Gop-hwa rampage like this, he would surely die.

His reason, blurred by the emotional tsunami, recognized the threat to his life.

Thus, he mobilized a method to break through the problem.

‘Homogenization, Changhae.’

-Sizzle…!

Water and ice were poured onto the flames. The hastily mimicked Changhae tried to suppress Gop-hwa.

The water and cold energy entered his body, where the raging heat was running wild, and began to cancel each other out.

-Whoosh! Gop-hwa, which had momentarily faltered, burned away the Changhae.

‘It’s not enough.’

The Changhae he had manifested wasn’t enough to calm the rampaging Gop-hwa, which was now feeding on his emotions.

“Of all times, why now…”

Just as he realized this, Changhae from an external source poured in.

It was Baek Ahrin, whom he had momentarily forgotten. She cut through the flames with her cold energy and approached, placing a hand on his hunched back.

Then, forming a hand seal with her other hand, a cool wave of Changhae energy flooded into his body.

Her overwhelming Changhae mixed with the Changhae he had manifested.

The sheer force of Baek Ahrin’s Changhae was like an ocean crashing down, and even Gop-hwa couldn’t resist and was gradually subdued.

-Whoosh…

Finally, the Gop-hwa that had been flickering outside his body subsided. The

last embers around his shoulders flickered out, and the flames of Gop-hwa were completely extinguished.

In that moment, all strength left his body. Like a puppet with its strings cut, his body wobbled and tilted.

His breathing was labored. It was hard to regain his composure. Baek Ahrin was saying something, but it was as if he were submerged in water; he couldn't hear her clearly.

His body collapsed. The ground came closer…

-Thud

"Oh dear, what a disaster… Are you alright?"

Before his body hit the ground, Baek Ahrin softly caught him, even as she sighed.

-Huff, huff…

His breathing was ragged.

'Hot… '

His body was burning. Though the immediate danger had passed, the heat that had built up inside him hadn't dissipated. His skin was so hot that steam was rising from it.

'Hot… '

It was hot.

Warmth was pleasant, but when it exceeded a certain threshold, it became unbearable heat. While it was better than cold, he still hated the heat.

'Something cool… '

“It’s over now, so it’s okay. Just breathe slowly…”

As he panted for breath, he felt a soothing hand patting his back.

Baek Ahrin’s characteristic coolness…

‘No… ’

Her cool hand swept down his back. With each stroke, his burning skin slowly cooled.

Without needing to observe, he could feel the cool energy radiating from Baek Ahrin.

He wanted to cool down.

Although the worst had been averted, the lingering heat and heightened emotions pushed him to make a choice.

“Yes, yes, you’re doing well. Just calm your breathing… Oh…”

He wrapped his arm around her slender waist and pressed his body against hers.

Her soft, ample figure gently embraced him.

At the same time, a refreshing coolness enveloped him.

‘Haaa… ’

[So cool…]

His body trembled involuntarily, and his mouth opened in relief. The accumulated heat dissipated.

It felt like plunging into cold water after sweating profusely…

“Oh my, are you acting spoiled again?”

Baek Ahrin chuckled softly.

With one hand, she patted his back, while the other unzipped his windbreaker.

-Ziiip…

As the windbreaker opened, it revealed the black tank top underneath.

“Oh my, was our Hayul scared because of the trial?”

Speaking in a strangely cutesy tone, Baek Ahrin pressed his head into the peach-colored valley of her chest.

It was soft and cool.

-Whoosh… The last embers of Gop-hwa flickered.

The Gop-hwa, which had been expelled from his body by Changhae, rubbed against Baek Ahrin’s cool skin.

-Sizzle…

The ice melted.

“…Huh?”

Suddenly, Baek Ahrin’s hand froze in place.

For once, a dazed sound escaped her lips.

* * *

Baek Ahrin saw Lee Hayul as a person like a hedgehog.

He was fundamentally full of fear and suspicion.

When someone approached him suddenly, he didn’t welcome them but

instead bristled with fear, raising his quills.

He wasn't aggressive and wouldn't charge at others first, but if someone tried to harm him, he would retaliate fiercely.

If others didn't approach him, he wouldn't approach them either.

He was the type to quietly settle in a corner, observing his surroundings.

[So cool…]

That was Lee Hayul before they became close.

Baek Ahrin looked down at Lee Hayul, who was now buried in her chest with a strange expression.

He seemed very satisfied, pressing his face deeper into the valley between her tank top.

Once Lee Hayul got close to someone… he became a completely different person.

The hedgehog, once full of fear and suspicion, turned into a puppy full of affection.

Even when startled by someone's sudden approach, he secretly enjoyed their presence, peeking around curiously.

He had almost no aggression, and instead of pricking those close to him with his quills when hurt, he would dig himself into a hole and hide.

Baek Ahrin had worked hard to get close to Lee Hayul.

From the moment they first met, and even more so after confirming that his Gop-hwa was comparable to Hong Yeon-hwa's, she had wanted to form a strong bond with him.

After realizing the unprecedented fact that he could manifest both Gop-hwa and Changhae, she wanted to be someone he could rely on for any request.

Because she believed that Lee Hayul could help her achieve what she desired.

And now…

"…Hahaha!"

Baek Ahrin felt hope.

Not just a possibility, but a tangible hope.

She couldn't help but laugh.

Her heartbeat irregularly hardened. The intruder inside her was displeased. But so what?

"Sss…"

-Hic

Baek Ahrin suddenly lowered her head and buried her nose in Lee Hayul's hair. As she took a deep breath, Lee Hayul flinched.

She didn't care. Instead, she hugged him tightly, trapping him in her arms.

It was warm. She could feel his body heat. The sensation of their moist skin rubbing together, the softness of his white hair tickling her face.

She kept inhaling.

She could smell his scent.

Lee Hayul, who had been sweating profusely due to Gop-hwa, didn't emit an unpleasant odor. Instead, his body's natural scent had become even stronger.

It made Baek Ahrin feel as though she were being soaked in honey.

Even Baek Ahrin, whose senses had been dulled by a wretched curse, could feel it that clearly.

The curse had weakened.

Though it was just a little for now… Lee Hayul's Gop-hwa could affect the curse.

If it was a Gop-hwa that understood 'Changhae'…it was possible.

"Hoo…"

Before long, her senses dulled again.

She pulled her nose away.

[Huh…?]

Lee Hayul had a question mark floating above his head. He seemed surprised by her sudden action. Even as he tilted his head in confusion, he remained defenseless, making her laugh again.

"Lee Hayul."

[Yes?]

"I saw it."

[Saw what?]

He tilted his head innocently again. Did he really not remember? Or had he forgotten in the heat of the moment?

Baek Ahrin lowered her head further and whispered into his ear.

"I saw you use Changhae."

Lee Hayul, who had been tilting his head in confusion, suddenly froze. Memories of what had just transpired flooded into his mind.

Like a fish frozen stiff, Lee Hayul's head creaked as it tilted.

[……]

[…?]

[…Yes? Uh?]

[Ah?]

[Damn?]

"Haha, look at that reaction."

Baek Ahrin giggled and lowered her hand.

"Lee Hayul, can you do me a favor?"

She caressed his backside.

Even in that moment, Lee Hayul remained frozen, unable to resist.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●●○○○ (69▷74/100)

[Cold] [Coolness] [Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion] [Cow?] [Guilt]

CHAPTER 195
HONG YEON-HWA'S TRIALS (1)

Lee Hayul had become a member of the Gop-hwa clan.

This was the news that had spread through the world after the recent regular banquet of the Gop-hwa clan.

The clan's family members, both from the main and branch families, gathered to witness it with their own eyes.

Everyone present saw the flames of Gop-hwa, surging from Lee Hayul's grasp, blooming like a red flower in full bloom.

That was proof enough.

There was no fool present who would dare doubt it, even though Lee Hayul had manifested Gop-hwa right before their eyes.

Even if the banquet had ended there, soon everyone around the world would have known that Lee Hayul had manifested Gop-hwa.

However, the news did not stop there.

– The power of the Gop-hwa that Lee Hayul manifested is said to rival the unprecedented Hong Yeon-hwa.

– The Fenghuo Sword, which had always remained transparent and void since the eternal rest of the founder, regained its lost color when he lifted it for the ceremony.

– Lee Hayul's appearance is so strikingly beautiful that even the mad dog Hong Yeon-hwa turned into a gentle lamb, embracing and doting on him everywhere they went…

The news that spread was so shocking and intense that informants from all factions had to work tirelessly, night and day, to verify the truth and deeper intentions behind it.

In any case, the result was as follows:

Lee Hayul was the one who manifested Gop-hwa, and he had a very close and affectionate relationship with Hong Yeon-hwa, the next head of the clan.

As a result, the perception that Lee Hayul was the cherished son-in-law of the Gop-hwa clan, fiercely protected by Hong Yeon-hwa, became widespread.

The flood of meeting requests pouring into Lee Hayul's inbox also decreased sharply.

This was because people feared what kind of retaliation they might face if they openly tried to approach someone chosen by the next head of the Gop-hwa clan.

Even within Shio-ram, the number of female students who approached Lee Hayul with obvious intentions decreased.

Likewise, those who didn't want to cause trouble with the Gop-hwa clan were keeping their distance.

"Hmm hmm hmm~"

However, amidst all this, there was one bold person who openly flirted with the son-in-law of the Gop-hwa clan.

At the sound of humming nearby, Hong Yeon-hwa glanced over.

Long, smooth yellow hair that reached down to her waist, and large, soft eyes that were wide open.

It was Elia, who, despite her innocent face, had a voluptuous figure that drew the eyes of any man.

As Elia hummed happily, Hong Yeon-hwa recalled the conversations they had both inside and outside the Tower of Growth.

"……"

For ordinary people, it might not be common, but among superhuman factions, polygamy was sometimes a thing.

In fact, it was quite common. Political marriages thrived among those who built their own factions, established territories, and ruled over others.

The current head of the Taesan clan had two husbands, and the head of the Changhae clan had two wives.

The head of the Gop-hwa clan… Hong Yeon-hwa's father had only one wife, but there were quite a few heads in the history of the clan who had multiple spouses.

"…Hah…"

She felt stifled.

'I can't just beat her up… '

Hong Yeon-hwa felt a sudden impulse but quickly suppressed it.

She was quite close to Elia. Since the beginning of the semester, Elia had chirped around her, and they had grown close. Now, they were good friends. She didn't want to beat her friend into a pulp.

More importantly, Lee Hayul cherished Elia.

Wasn't she the first person he met and the first to help him?

Perhaps because of that, Lee Hayul had opened up to Elia significantly.

Whatever the reason, what if Hong Yeon-hwa really beat Elia to a pulp like a

dog?

She couldn't predict how Lee Hayul would react in that situation.

…No, to be precise, she didn't want to imagine it.

The adorable child, so pure and lovely that she could be called a celestial being sent from heaven.

If those pretty eyes, which now only looked at Hong Yeon-hwa, were to fill with hatred and hostility…

Just imagining Lee Hayul crying and feeling sorrowful made her dizzy.

Moreover, even Lee Seo-yul, who was gradually opening up to Elia, would harbor even more rejection and hostility towards Hong Yeon-hwa…

Hong Yeon-hwa didn't want Lee Hayul to hate her, nor did she want Lee Hayul to be sad.

'Ugh… '

It was truly a frustrating situation.

If it were someone who had no connection to Lee Hayul, someone who hadn't built a close relationship with him, she could easily chase them away.

But Elia, and that strange professor who was her mentor, Baek Ahrin… she couldn't just get rid of them.

Interfering with Lee Hayul's personal relationships was not the right thing to do.

Hong Yeon-hwa trudged back to the dormitory.

Not her original dorm, but Lee Hayul's dormitory.

After realizing that the sneaky yellow stray cat, Elia, had settled in Lee

Hayul's dorm, Hong Yeon-hwa also moved in.

There was a small fear in her heart. What if… what if he let Elia stay but kicked her out? That fear and anxiety lingered in her mind.

Fortunately, her worries were unfounded.

Lee Hayul didn't kick her out.

In fact, he was secretly happy about it and kept hovering around, asking if she was uncomfortable with anything.

Thanks to that, Hong Yeon-hwa was able to settle into Lee Hayul's dorm without any issues.

– [Cadet Hong Yeon-hwa, verified.]

Using the verification code Lee Hayul had given her, she opened the door.

The door slid open silently, but as Hong Yeon-hwa was about to step inside, her face stiffened.

"Huh?"

Sensing something unusual, Elia also stopped in her tracks. Tilting her head for a moment, Elia let out an "Ah" in realization.

She, too, had sensed the presence inside the dorm.

There were two presences.

One was very familiar—Lee Hayul's presence.

In the past, it had been so faint that it was hard to detect, but lately, it had become as clear as if he had been fully nourished.

And the other presence… was cold.

Hong Yeon-hwa glanced down at the floor. There were two pairs of shoes at the entrance.

"……"

With a stiff expression, Hong Yeon-hwa stepped into the dorm. Elia, blinking, followed behind her.

The light was on beyond the sliding door that separated the hallway from the living room. Shadows could be seen through the frosted glass.

With trembling hands, Hong Yeon-hwa placed her hand on the sliding door and calmly pushed it open.

The lit living room came into view.

And…

"Haha, that tickles. I'm not going anywhere, so stop it, okay? It's fine~"

[Nng…]

Lee Hayul was sitting on the sofa, nestled in Baek Ahrin's arms, their bellies pressed together.

"……"

– Huuuu…

Something was off about Lee Hayul.

For some reason, he was sweating profusely. His hair was drenched, and the sweat dripping down his cheeks seeped into Baek Ahrin's cleavage.

His mouth was slightly open, revealing a soft pink tongue, and his breath, mixed with the scent of sweetness, escaped in shallow gasps.

"Now, now…"

As Baek Ahrin gently stroked his hair, Lee Hayul lowered his head.

His face was soon buried in her chest, the black sleeveless top she wore revealing her cleavage as it swallowed his face.

He pressed his nose against her cool skin, trying to cool down.

“Hehe, how cute…”

Baek Ahrin, as if approving of his actions, guided his head deeper into her chest with a smile.

Then, she looked up and met Hong Yeon-hwa’s gaze.

“Oh, you’re back?”

With a stiff expression, as if she might crumble at any moment, Hong Yeon-hwa stood frozen. Baek Ahrin waved her left hand nonchalantly.

Some time passed.

“So…”

Sitting at the kitchen table, leaving the chaotic living room behind, Hong Yeon-hwa finally spoke.

Her lips, which had been tightly sealed as if in silent meditation, parted, and a voice filled with simmering emotions leaked out.

“…You’re saying that Hayul’s Gop-hwa trial triggered, and you were calming him down…”

“Yup, that’s right.”

Baek Ahrin, sitting across from her, nodded while fixing her disheveled hair.

The trial of Gop-hwa.

Hong Yeon-hwa had experienced it once as well.

It was the severe side effect that came with the transformation of Gop-hwa.

There were various types of trials, but the first one was usually the same.

It would draw out the manifestor's memories, causing emotional turmoil.

From the trivialities of daily life to the major events that had a significant impact on their life…

The emotions that were drawn out would soon escalate, causing the person to become highly unstable.

If they couldn't overcome it properly, the flames would eventually consume the manifestor as fuel, leading to their complete destruction.

Hong Yeon-hwa had tried to endure it on her own for days, but she was only able to overcome it after receiving a scarf as a gift from Lee Hayul.

"Hayul hasn't manifested Gop-hwa for long, right? But the side effects are already quite severe. So I had no choice but to stick close and provide intensive care. Ah~ it was really dangerous earlier at the workshop."

So, it made sense that Lee Hayul had become so disheveled.

"Therefore, I'll be staying here for a while. Please take care of me~"

"Yeon-hwa, I'm sorry…"

"No, it's not your fault, Hayul. Don't apologize."

Baek Ahrin waved her hand cheerfully, asking to be taken care of, while Lee Hayul, nestled in her arms, mumbled apologies.

Of course, Hong Yeon-hwa wanted to immediately slap Baek Ahrin and separate the two…

– Sizzle…

But it was true that Baek Ahrin was helping to suppress the heat and emotional escalation building up inside Lee Hayul, so she couldn't do that.

Of course, Hong Yeon-hwa could help regulate Gop-hwa too, but… she wasn't as good as Changhae.

Having experienced the trial herself, Hong Yeon-hwa knew how grueling it was to endure without help.

If even Hong Yeon-hwa, who had lived a relatively smooth life, had struggled, what kind of painful memories would Lee Hayul, who had faced countless hardships since childhood, be forced to recall…

"Hah…"

In the end, separating the two would only increase the suffering Lee Hayul had to endure.

And with the possibility of death looming as the worst-case scenario, she couldn't put Lee Hayul in danger just because of her jealousy.

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a deep sigh.

It was a silent sign of approval.

"Sigh… Look at how limp he is. Hayul, can you eat some porridge?"

"Even if he doesn't want to, we have to feed him. The trial will last for a few days, so we need to keep him well-fed."

A new, unwanted housemate had moved in.

"Oh, by the way, Hayul gave me a ring."

"You damn b****."

* * *

[The Master of The Tower of Harmony tilts their head.]

[The Master of ***** wonders if this is a change.]

[The Master of The Tower of Knowledge shrugs.]

[The Master of The Tower of Growth expresses concern.]

[Soon, ***** will enter the *****. Prepare *****.]

[The Master of The Tower of Knowledge nods.]

CHAPTER 196
HONG YEON-HWA'S TRIALS (2)

"Hey, how much are you eating? Eat moderately."

"What? Hong, I'm only on my second piece here…?"

Recently, breakfast had become quite lively.

It was the influence of a new guest who had entered the dormitory.

I mechanically shoved tasteless meat into my mouth while listening to the conversation.

"Two pieces? That's a lot. Stop eating."

"Come on, that's too much. Who's going to complain about just two pieces? This won't even fill an ordinary person! Let's not do this among superhumans."

Hong Yeon-hwa, glancing sideways while eating, and Baek Ahrin, who paused her chopsticks in disbelief at the nagging about eating just two pieces of meat.

The bickering, which had started with Hong Yeon-hwa's one-sided complaints, felt oddly like background music.

Maybe it was because they knew they weren't genuinely arguing, but the others, including me, didn't pay much attention and continued eating breakfast.

Lee Seo-yul was still struggling to shake off sleep, nodding her head up and down, while Elia and I sat on either side, looking after her during the meal.

Across from us, Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, and Elia were eating breakfast.

“I apologize for saying this to a lady, but… you really look unappealing.”

While the bickering continued, Elia, who had been quietly picking at her food, casually poked Hong Yeon-hwa.

At first, she had refused to eat at the same table, but recently she had been sitting down without saying much and sharing meals.

“What? If it’s inappropriate, don’t say it! Besides, aren’t you supposed to be on my side?”

Hong Yeon-hwa raised her voice in anger.

“Me?”

“What kind of response is that…? I’m your employer!”

“My employer, strictly speaking, is the head of the Hong clan, Hong Jin-sun. Besides, I, Elia, can point out mistakes even if the other party is my employer.”

“That’s right! They say you shouldn’t bother anyone while eating, but you’re tormenting me at the table?”

The situation had changed.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been poking at Baek Ahrin, was now being double-teamed by Elia and Baek Ahrin.

Was it because she had some grudge against Elia? Elia showed no hesitation in attacking Hong Yeon-hwa.

“Ugh.”

Eventually, Hong Yeon-hwa sulked. She scrunched up her face and stuffed

her mouth full of stir-fried pork.

Hong Yeon-hwa preferred meat dishes, so she always had them on the table.

Among them, she particularly liked stir-fried pork, so I often prepared it according to her taste.

While observing her, I noticed that Hong Yeon-hwa's bowl was almost empty.

"Yeon-hwa? Your bowl, please."

"Huh? Oh."

With chopsticks in her mouth, Hong Yeon-hwa blinked at the hand extended toward her.

Then, she let out a soft "Ah" and quietly handed over her bowl.

I accepted it and filled it with steaming rice before handing it back.

"Here you go, there's plenty left, so let me know if you need more."

Superhumans eat a lot, after all. My portion had also increased significantly compared to before.

At this table, there were four superhumans, one fairy, and one presumed fairy. The amount of ingredients consumed in a single meal was enormous, so I made it a habit to prepare extra rice.

"Hayul…! You're the only one for me…!"

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes glistened as she received the bowl.

That sight stood out vividly amidst the hazy atmosphere.

Her flowing red hair and shining eyes looked particularly beautiful today.

"Hehe."

A smile spread across my face. Perhaps it was because the Gop-hwa was burning intensely inside, my joy felt even greater.

Due to the trial of the Gop-hwa, I had missed most of the lectures.

I had complained that I could handle my schedule, but I was immediately subdued by those around me.

Given my current condition, where could I wander off alone?

[…You really don't have to miss out because of me…]

The problem was that I wasn't the only one who had skipped lectures.

I cautiously surveyed my surroundings. It was past 10 a.m. Normally, lectures would be in full swing, yet only Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin remained nearby.

"No, you really have to skip. You never know when the Gop-hwa will go berserk, do you? If it suddenly erupts while you're alone, it won't be something you can laugh off."

[I can control it… I managed on my own last time…]

"Hey, come on!"

"Yeon-hwa…"

In the end, I had to receive focused care for a while.

Of course, I wouldn't just suppress the Gop-hwa by pouring my energy into it.

Though it was a trial, it was fundamentally a phenomenon that arose from the Gop-hwa changing.

Thus, it wasn't about merely suppressing it; it required a process of

acceptance and adaptation.

Therefore, during such times, I had to meditate alone while having Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin as my fire extinguishers.

“Don’t suppress it too much. If you push your desires down too far, they might burst out in unexpected ways… That’s right, yes, just like this~”

…I did show some embarrassing moments in between, but nevertheless, I was gradually managing the Gop-hwa.

The question was why the Gop-hwa remained within my body even after I had turned off the homogenization.

Normally, when the homogenization is released, the energy that changed inside returns to my original mana.

But for some reason, there were no signs of the Gop-hwa releasing.

‘I guess I’ll have to check on this after the trial is over… ’

* * *

After it became easier for Lee Hayul to manage the Gop-hwa through meditation, we trained to manage the Gop-hwa even in combat situations through simple sparring.

“Haah!” Hong Yeon-hwa gripped her sword tightly.

Her strong grip twisted the hilt, and the mana she infused wrapped around the blade, forming a strong aura. The fiery red aura swelled up.

She pulled the sword up over her head. Her body, enhanced by the Strength Technique, leaped, pulling back like a bow, and as she spread her limbs, she poured all her power into the downward strike.

A slash utilizing the Strength Technique and the Qi. When combined with

Hong Yeon-hwa's physical abilities, even a sword that resembled a club could easily topple a building.

"Hah!"

The powerful strike tore through the air and struck the spear.

– Kwoooong…!

The sound of the spear being sliced and the ground being shattered echoed loudly…

But the expected sound did not come.

What Hong Yeon-hwa heard was not the explosive sound of the ground being burst and collapsing, but a long, resonating sound.

The spear absorbed the force.

It neither broke nor was cut.

It sagged downward like a trampoline receiving a heavy object, then rebounded, sending her arm flying wide.

– Kwang!

"Ugh!"

The sword was pushed back. Hong Yeon-hwa's body floated into the air. Only then did her red hair flutter wildly as the wind burst out.

Hong Yeon-hwa hurriedly reached out. Before the spearhead could reach her, she released her mana with her palm.

Kwarrr! The red mana, released without considering fuel efficiency, pushed the opponent away and propelled Hong Yeon-hwa's body backward.

Due to the nature of the fire, her body was easily pushed back. The moment

Hong Yeon-hwa landed on the ground, the spear rushed at her again.

The opponent seemed intent on not giving her any breathing room, dashing toward her while skimming the ground. Hong Yeon-hwa responded to the sight of Lee Hayul, whose white hair fluttered as he thrust the spear.

She had already regained her stance. Gripping the sword tightly, she swung it forward.

Her arm, raised to its fullest strength, moved, leaving afterimages behind. Soon, countless red slashes were drawn in front of her.

A reckless barrage of powerful strikes that did not discern between reality and illusion. Even a monster of considerable rank would be sliced into small pieces upon being struck by such an attack, and white qi suddenly intruded into the fray.

Like a loach stirring up a puddle, it slipped in, disrupting the chaotic strikes.

Kwang! The powerful strike battered the defenseless ground. With a loud explosion, dust rose as Lee Hayul suddenly appeared.

The distance had narrowed. The sword and spear were exchanged.

The spear reached first. Hong Yeon-hwa targeted not Lee Hayul but the spear's strike.

– Chajachajang!

The weapons tangled chaotically. Different colored auras scratched and pushed against each other.

'No… '

The red was pushed back. The aura was shaved away.

The spear wedged its way through the strikes.

Hong Yeon-hwa's attacks were often described as strong. With a solid foundation, she infused tremendous power to push her opponent down honestly. The honest path was reinforced by her experience and intuition, and the Gop-hwa was used in conjunction to enhance her lethality.

Powerful attacks were intercepted before they could reach, and her defenses were countered and easily brushed aside.

Lee Hayul's spear techniques could be described as soft. The spear flowed like a gentle stream, redirecting the powerful strikes to harmless locations.

Moreover, it was also illusory. The spear, obscured like shrouded mist, made it difficult to read the next movement.

What came next…

Bang! A thunderous flash erupted from within the mist. The spear that shone like lightning pierced through the gaps in her consciousness.

– Pok!

In an instant, she responded by deflecting all the incoming strikes and managed to hit the spearhead in her solar plexus.

Hong Yeon-hwa's expression went blank.

Though she had wrapped herself in the aura like armor, even without it, she would have sustained no injury.

Even as the spear thrust at her, it felt as if it was concerned about hurting her, a gentle touch.

As Hong Yeon-hwa flinched and trembled, Lee Hayul jumped back, creating distance.

'How many times has this happened?'

It was a repeated pattern. They clashed, and before she knew it, the spear was touching her body. Simultaneously, Lee Hayul created distance…

“Yap…!”

Baek Ahrin jumped in.

She had been blown away by a powerful attack earlier and had just returned.

Gripping a similarly blunt spear, she charged at Lee Hayul.

Lee Hayul, also gripping a spear, countered.

– Pok!

“Ah.”

The situation was similar. Like Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin clashed with Lee Hayul, and soon Lee Hayul’s spear was poking and prodding at Baek Ahrin.

“Ugh!”

Baek Ahrin did not back down and pursued Lee Hayul. A swirling vortex wrapped around her raised left arm. Zzzzt! The blue aura, tangled like a coil, began to frost over.

Vortex Chain. As Baek Ahrin unleashed her attack, Lee Hayul also reached out his palm. Similarly, a white aura swirled around his right hand.

At the point of contact, their palms met. Kwarrr! Following that, the two different vortexes poured out like a dam breaking.

In that moment, Baek Ahrin interlocked fingers with Lee Hayul.

Amidst the chaotic swirling vortex, her other hand released the spear and wrapped around the aura.

Zzzzt! The aura made of cold wrapped around and struck…

– Pok!

“Eh?”

Lee Hayul twisted his wrist as he pulled his hand away. The air around his hand twisted, and the vortex was disrupted.

The launched strike jabbed at Lee Hayul’s neck. Clang! It felt like metal, not flesh or aura. The strike failed to leave even a scratch on what was an artifact of the highest quality.

In the time wasted, a fist that pierced through the gaps in consciousness struck her chest.

Another de facto hit allowed.

Baek Ahrin blinked in surprise.

Then, wrapping her arms around her chest, she shouted.

“…Why do you keep aiming for my chest? This is sexual harassment!”

[What?]

[No way!]

[That’s not it…!]

Since entering the sparring, the sharp intensity of Lee Hayul’s presence had finally faltered.

His previously stiff expression relaxed, and he flailed his arms like a penguin, expressing vehement denial.

“Now!”

Seizing the moment, Baek Ahrin suddenly thrust her spear forward. Hong Yeon-hwa, caught off guard, also launched an attack.

[Ugh!]

[That's cowardly…!]

It didn't count as a valid hit.

"Ugh… Let's take a short break."

– Clang!

Baek Ahrin flopped down where she stood.

She carelessly tossed the dull spear nearby and plopped down on the green grass, letting out deep sighs as if exhausted.

–… Puhuh…

Seeing Baek Ahrin like that, Lee Hayul also let out a big sigh.

Having moved his body so much, the Gop-hwa was stirring within him. Strange memories kept surfacing, and even unpleasant memories he had tried to bury were resurfacing.

His body was damp with sweat. The heat was building up, making him sweat easily. Although he was being told that it smelled good around him… it was hard not to care.

Trying to release some heat, he took a deep breath and sat down on the ground.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa also relaxed her stance. Leaning against her sword, which was stuck into the ground, she blinked absentmindedly.

The cadets had made significant progress through the Tower of Growth.

Even outside of the tower, they were experiencing rapid growth due to the

blessing of growth, and inside the tower, an additional multiplier was added.

To exaggerate a bit, just breathing inside the tower could lead to meaningful changes in their bodies. They had spent five days pushing their limits and wielding their weapons in such an environment.

It was an environment where growth was inevitable, even if they didn't want it.

Especially during this entry into the tower's "Observation," they had achieved tremendous growth.

A battle against their own selves, manifested as individual entities. It was a growth experience more valuable than they had imagined.

Often, they seek advice from third parties to understand their strengths and weaknesses or evaluate themselves from an objective standpoint.

This time, through the observation, they could keenly feel their own level objectively.

Actions speak louder than words. In a similar vein, things that had previously gone unnoticed became clear.

Their strengths. In what situations do they shine and exhibit outstanding traits? They understood the challenges and annoyances faced by their opponents.

Their weaknesses. In what situations do their weaknesses become prominent, and what aspects make them vulnerable and fatal from the opponent's perspective?

In a way, it was a time for self-reflection… a true time of observation.

Hong Yeon-hwa had also grown significantly during this entry into the tower.

Her physical abilities and mana had greatly increased, and she was confident

that her skills had improved remarkably.

Something in the back of her mind was itching, suggesting that she might soon be able to unleash her unique abilities in the technique category.

At that moment of thought, Hong Yeon-hwa replayed the recent battle in her mind.

To put it bluntly… she had been overwhelmingly outmatched.

Not using the Gop-hwa could not be an excuse.

This sparring was a melee battle that only allowed the Strength Technique and Qi. The conditions were the same for Lee Hayul as well.

Even with Baek Ahrin's assistance, she had still reached that level.

She had simply been overwhelmed in terms of skill.

Although she had been proud of her considerable growth from the Tower of Growth, seeing Lee Hayul's growth made her feel deflated.

'…What on earth… '

An exceptional student. The first possibility chosen by the master of the Tower of Growth.

She felt as if she had been reminded of the weight of that name.

'So I need to work harder.'

Hong Yeon-hwa steeled her gaze. Although she had been overwhelmed, she did not feel defeated. There was no time for that.

To protect Lee Hayul, who often returned battered from various incidents, Hong Yeon-hwa had to grow stronger.

"?"

Just as she made that determination and took a deep breath, she felt a piercing gaze on her skin.

– Paan…

The owner of the gaze was Lee Hayul, who was sitting on the grass.

His eyes, which had been closed earlier, were now wide open.

As Hong Yeon-hwa blinked, she followed the direction of his gaze.

In truth, there was no need to. She could feel the sticky gaze sticking to her skin.

Lee Hayul had his mouth agape, staring blankly at Hong Yeon-hwa's chest… No, he was openly staring at it.

'…… '

Hong Yeon-hwa examined her appearance.

Due to wearing a sleeveless top, her cleavage was fully exposed.

Her skin, flushed from exercise, was steaming, and droplets of sweat trickled down her neck, seeping between her cleavage… a rather indecent sight.

She moved her body slightly. Lee Hayul's gaze stuck to her without hesitation.

'Hehe.'

A smile formed on Hong Yeon-hwa's lips.

'So cute… '

His gaze was so blatant. He seemed to have no intention of hiding it.

No, it seemed he didn't even realize that he had been caught looking by Hong

Yeon-hwa.

Lee Hayul usually felt awkward when his eyes were open.

He might not even be aware that he was currently looking.

‘Is it because of the Gop-hwa?’

His gaze was incredibly intense. Lee Hayul, stimulated by the trial of the Gop-hwa, was likely reacting to such indecent sights.

Hong Yeon-hwa grinned mischievously and crawled closer to Lee Hayul.

Just how focused was he that he didn’t notice her approaching right up to his face?

The sweet scent brushed against her nose. Like Hong Yeon-hwa, Lee Hayul had been sweating profusely, and his body scent filled her nostrils.

With playful intent, Hong Yeon-hwa brought her lips close to his forehead.

– Smooch!

The soft and moist touch collided.

The dazed look in his eyes finally focused.

After blinking several times, his eyes widened as if he had just come to his senses.

“…Hik?”

He quickly covered his forehead with both hands. That action was incredibly cute. With her eyes slightly narrowed, Hong Yeon-hwa kissed the back of his hands again.

– Smooch!

“Ugh…”

A muffled sound escaped between Lee Hayul’s tightly shut lips, unable to form words.

He looked flustered and embarrassed. The back of his hands felt quite warm. It had been some time since she last cooled him down. She decided to cool him off after this.

“Hayul?”

This time, she didn’t extend her hand first. Instead, she lightly tapped her lips with her fingers.

With his mind slightly returning, Lee Hayul swallowed hard.

His head spun. The heat was building, making his reason hazy. His pupils spun around. Whoosh! The Gop-hwa surged. His emotions were fanned into a frenzy. Desires surged. Ah, Yeon-hwa is so pretty, I want to be spoiled, lips? A kiss?

His thoughts tangled chaotically. The conclusion was reached. He blankly pursed his lips…

– Thud!

At that moment, a hand touched his back.

“Whoa, the Gop-hwa has gotten this strong already…”

“Huh?”

A coolness seeped into his hot body. Thanks to the energy of the Changhae flowing in, his reason returned somewhat.

“Hey! You little brat…! What the hell are you doing?!”

“What? I’m just calming down Hayul’s Gop-hwa, aren’t I?”

“Exactly! Why are you interrupting now?!”

“Interrupting? I’ve never done that~”

“Ahhh!”

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a loud scream.

“Hieeeek…!”

Lee Ji-yeon, who had let out a sound that seemed to escape her breath, rushed in.

Before she could react, she hugged me tightly and buried my face in her ample chest.

“…Did they all collectively go crazy?”

Hong Yeon-hwa, witnessing that scene, subtly drew her sword.

CHAPTER 197
HONG YEON-HWA'S TRIALS (3)

Although most of the lectures were skipped due to the physical deterioration caused by the Gop-hwa trial, the mentoring with Choi Jiyeon was not omitted.

Fortunately, there were no cooperative assignments in progress, so it was easy to miss the lectures.

The attendance issue could be handled with a medical leave, and the missed material could be made up by submitting assignments.

It would be a bit tiring to deal with the accumulated workload all at once, but as long as my grades weren't affected, I was grateful.

However, if I skipped the mentoring with Choi Jiyeon, it wouldn't just affect me—it would inconvenience her as well.

While I could make up for the missed assignments with a bit of extra effort on my part, Choi Jiyeon's schedule would also be disrupted.

Of course, missing two or three sessions wouldn't cause any major problems. Schedules aren't always perfectly aligned, and delays happen often.

But since I wasn't bedridden or anything, and it wouldn't take long, I decided to proceed with the mentoring.

Instead, Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin, who had just finished sparring with me, decided to accompany me. They were concerned that Gop-hwa might act up and put me in danger.

I had already gotten Choi Jiyeon's permission. When I casually asked her via text, she said it would be nice to meet after a long time and agreed.

“Are you still learning necromancy from Jiyeon unnie?”

As we walked leisurely toward the meeting place, Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been enjoying the gentle breeze, suddenly looked at me and asked.

“Yes, Taesan is famous for necromancy. I wanted to learn it, so I asked her to teach me.”

I nodded and raised my hand. Soon, a small wisp of necromantic energy, like a will-o’-the-wisp, floated above my palm.

It was extracted from a random monster, a form that seemed to flicker like a colorless mirage.

It wasn’t very useful. While it could inhabit a corpse, it didn’t offer much in terms of performance. It could barely serve as a meat shield.

‘If it doesn’t work out, I’ll just use it as fuel for Gop-hwa.’

Since Gop-hwa burns anything like an old country dog, I could just throw in the miscellaneous spirits I’ve gathered to instantly boost Gop-hwa’s output.

As I thought this, the spirit on my palm trembled slightly.

“Oh… have you already started? Hayul, is there anything you can’t do?”

Hong Yeon-hwa bent down to examine the spirit on my palm, her voice full of admiration.

“Hehe.”

Her praise made the corners of my mouth twitch involuntarily.

Compliments from someone who likes me are the sweetest thing. Even if I regained my sense of taste and could gorge myself on sweet cookies and cakes, I wouldn’t be able to savor sweetness like this.

“It hasn’t been long since your mentoring started, and you’re already handling spirits? You learn so fast.”

“I can’t even do basic magic properly… Hayul, just how many talents do you have?”

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered, zipping up the thin windbreaker draped over her shoulders.

As the zipper was pulled up, the pale skin that had been visible disappeared from sight.

The scent of milk, which had been wafting strongly, also faded slightly, blocked by the windbreaker.

“……”

For a moment, I pursed my lips. Feeling embarrassed by my own sense of disappointment, I lifted my head.

Our eyes met—her jewel-like red eyes staring right at me.

Her gaze briefly flickered to where I had been looking, and then her eyes curved gently.

Hong Yeon-hwa lightly pinched my cheek.

“Hmph… Just wait until tonight. Got it?”

“Y-yes…”

“Good boy.”

These days, sleep no longer scares me.

I used to suffer from severe insomnia, and even when I managed to fall asleep, I would always have nightmares, making me hate sleeping. But now,

when I sleep in someone's arms, I don't have nightmares or insomnia.

When I close my eyes, savoring the warmth and the steady heartbeat from the soft body next to me, I fall asleep without even realizing it.

Nodding obediently, I looked forward to the happiness I would feel tonight.

"If I'm going to stop Gop-hwa from acting up while you sleep, I'll have to sleep next to you too."

"Shut up."

Soon after, we arrived at the meeting place, a spacious natural park with a grassy field.

Various flowers were planted along the park's walking trails, providing a scenic view.

Shadows were cast under the sparsely planted trees, making it a perfect spot for a picnic.

'It's close to the dorms. Maybe I should come here with Seo-yul sometime.'

It would be nice to pack a simple lunch and come out here for some fresh air.

I briefly surveyed the area as we walked further in.

Choi Jiyeon was sitting on a bench under the shade of a tree, waiting for us. She was resting her chin on her hand, intently staring at a hologram, giving off a serene atmosphere.

With her natural green and brown hues, Choi Jiyeon blended into the surroundings even more. Even the hologram she was looking at was set to a green color.

Noticing our presence, Choi Jiyeon blinked her green eyes and looked up.

Her gaze swept over me and the others, and I gave her a small bow in return.

When it was announced that I would be missing lectures due to the Gop-hwa trial, I received a flood of text messages asking about my well-being.

Among them was a message from Choi Jiyeon. I had thanked her in my reply, but I intended to express my gratitude in person as well.

Come to think of it, we've gotten quite close now. I still owe her for what happened in China, so maybe I should subtly bring up the fairy matter?

[Thank you for your concern.]

[Fortunately, my body is fine—]

"Huh?!"

[—was… it?]

Choi Jiyeon's eyes widened in shock.

Then, with a strange scream, she jumped off the bench as if she had landed on a hot frying pan.

As I stood frozen in place, startled by the bizarre sight, she flailed her arms and suddenly lunged at me, pulling me into her embrace.

My face was buried between her ample chest.

[?]

A question mark popped up above my head.

Hong Yeon-hwa's face twisted into a frown.

* * *

I wanted to scream and faint.

Forcing myself to keep my eyes open, I looked down at Lee Hayul, who was nestled in my arms.

A sweet scent tickled my nose, and I felt the warmth and softness of his small frame.

My senses were overwhelmed by these stimulating sensations.

Choi Jiyeon, using her sixth sense, checked on Lee Hayul again.

The perception of vitality through Taesan. By expanding the scope, she could even detect the vitality of others who weren't connected to the earth. It was a very difficult technique, but Choi Jiyeon could manage it to some extent.

Through this, she examined Lee Hayul again.

An empty vessel. A void, with its contents slowly, but surely, evaporating…

'What the…!'

The vitality she had painstakingly filled last time was already almost depleted.

Choi Jiyeon's eyes trembled with frustration.

She had overexerted herself to restore his vitality, to the point where she had been bedridden for a day or two. How had it drained so quickly again?

What had he been doing outside? Was he gambling away his vitality or something?

The thought of him suddenly collapsing somewhere sent a chill down her spine.

'Gop-hwa…? Could that be it?'

As Choi Jiyeon's mind raced, she recalled Lee Hayul's condition.

The trial that came with Gop-hwa's transformation. He had mentioned that he was skipping most of his lectures because of it. She vividly remembered sending him a message of concern at the time.

Gop-hwa… It could be affecting him.

Considering the nature of Gop-hwa, it wasn't impossible. After all, Gop-hwa was the most dangerous of the unique abilities within the Three Great Clans, often killing its bearers.

Of course, she couldn't be sure.

No one could be certain about Lee Hayul's current condition.

After all, his body contained not one, but two of the Three Great Clans' unique abilities.

Taesan and Gop-hwa.

This was the first time in history that such abilities had manifested in a single individual.

No one knew what kind of interaction might be occurring between them.

'No, I need to restore his vitality first… '

Choi Jiyeon shook her head. This wasn't the time to dwell on such thoughts.

First, she needed to replenish his depleted vitality. Although she didn't have enough energy to fully restore him, she could at least give him a decent amount…

"Unnie."

Suddenly, a cold voice pierced her ears.

Choi Jiyeon's shoulders jerked at the chilling aura that seemed to freeze her

in place.

She stiffly lifted her head, only to be met with a pair of eyes that threatened to burn her alive.

“Unnie, do you want to die?”

“Eek…”

“What do you think you’re doing right now?”

It was Hong Yeon-hwa, her crimson eyes blazing with fury. Within those eyes, hellfire raged.

Choi Jiyeon swallowed hard.

The use of the word “unnie” and the bare minimum of respectful language… hardly mattered at this point.

The emotions in Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes and voice were so intense that they seemed ready to tear her apart.

The sound of Hong Yeon-hwa’s teeth grinding together sent a shiver down Choi Jiyeon’s spine, making her feel like her life was in danger.

If Hong Yeon-hwa were to attack, she would try to resist, but even with a year of experience at Shio-ram, she wasn’t confident she could win…

“Jiyeon unnie? What’s going on? Why are you hugging him like that?”

Baek Ahrin, who stood beside her, wasn’t looking very pleased either.

At first glance, her expression seemed as gentle as usual, but Choi Jiyeon, who had grown up with Baek Ahrin, could tell.

Baek Ahrin was also displeased. And that displeasure was directed at Choi Jiyeon.

Suddenly, a memory from their childhood surfaced in Choi Jiyeon's mind.

Back when neither of them had manifested their unique abilities yet, but their personalities were already clear.

The memory of being tormented by the lively and impulsive Hong Yeon-hwa, who had the innocent cruelty of a child…

Choi Jiyeon had tried to fight back, but in the end, she had been defeated and left lying on the ground, with Hong Yeon-hwa looking down at her with a pure, cruel smile, while Baek Ahrin giggled beside her…

It was just a childhood memory, but the feelings of frustration from those countless torments still lingered.

They were good younger sisters, but there had been times when they had given her a hard time…

Choi Jiyeon's shoulders slumped. Her arms instinctively tightened, pulling Lee Hayul even closer into her embrace.

Hong Yeon-hwa's gaze grew even more menacing.

'…?'

Feeling the intensified hostility, Choi Jiyeon found herself in a strange mood.

She could read the emotions behind the gaze that seemed ready to tear her apart.

Anger and hostility.

And…

'Jealousy?'

Jealousy, envy, and resentment…

Choi Jiyeon blinked, unaware of Hong Yeon-hwa's clenched fists trembling with rage.

Jealousy is an emotion that comes from envying someone who is better than you.

It was a feeling Choi Jiyeon had often harbored toward Hong Yeon-hwa.

She had been envious of Hong Yeon-hwa. She had been jealous of Baek Ahrin. She had even resented her own mother.

Even though Choi Jiyeon had manifested her own unique ability, she hadn't received as much praise or the same level of expectations as they had.

Her talents were relatively lacking, and she had often been compared to those around her, even if she pretended not to care.

Now… that feeling had reversed.

Hong Yeon-hwa was fiercely jealous of Choi Jiyeon.

"……"

Choi Jiyeon felt an indescribable mix of emotions. It was hard to interpret… but it left her feeling strangely warm inside…

– Tap, tap

[Um…]

[Could you let go of me now?]

"Oh, oh, yes…"

Feeling the danger of being punched at any moment, Lee Hayul tapped her waist urgently.

Only then did Choi Jiyeon, with a dazed expression, release him from her

embrace.

– Gurgle…?

As Lee Hayul pulled away and stepped back, his body suddenly shuddered.

[Huh?]

Lee Hayul, who hadn't noticed it before, widened his eyes and quickly covered his mouth with both hands.

He felt a strange heaviness in his stomach.

In such a short time, his vitality had been partially restored.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Choi Jiyeon

●●●●○○○○○○(46▷47/100)

[Successor of Taesan] [Good Person] [Timid?] [Curiosity]

CHAPTER 198
SAME BED, DIFFERENT DREAMS

A specter, resembling a transparent will-o'-the-wisp, floated eerily in the air, exuding a sinister aura.

The specter drifted aimlessly for a while, as if lost, before being sucked into the corpse of a bird-like monster lying on the grass.

-Thud.

The corpse twitched. Thanks to preservation treatment, the body hadn't been damaged, but the once lifeless corpse began to move on its own.

The corpse flopped around like a fish out of water for a while before finally defying nature and standing on its two feet.

Chirp-chirp— The monster, now even emitting bird-like cries, flapped its wings and perched on Lee Hayul's shoulder.

It was necromancy—the art of manipulating the flesh and spirit of the dead.

"It looks like a sparrow. Is this an 8th-tier one?"

[Yes, it's 8th-tier. Thanks to that, it's the easiest to handle with necromancy.]

"Even considering that, it's impressive. How long has it been since you learned this?"

Chirp-chirp— The monster, looking exactly like a living sparrow, busily scanned its surroundings. Hong Yeon-hwa cautiously reached out a finger to touch it.

"Hmm… It's cold."

Hong Yeon-hwa frowned as she rubbed the stiff feathers.

It acted like it was alive, but it lacked the warmth of a living creature. Likewise, there was no heartbeat, no matter how closely one listened. It was, in essence, a moving corpse.

It was only because the body was intact that it didn't evoke much disgust. If it had been a rotting, decayed corpse, the feeling would have been far less pleasant.

[How is it?]

Lee Hayul tilted his head and asked.

"No problems. The coordination is seamless, and the specter is intact."

Choi Jiyeon briefly examined the state of the specter.

The most basic and efficient method of handling a specter was to insert it into a corpse and use it as a puppet.

Using a specter on its own was highly limited in terms of physical interference, and employing only a corpse was, at best, a one-time measure like corpse explosions.

Thus, the standard practice was to stuff a specter into an empty corpse and use it as a soldier to control at will.

The specter within the corpse… there were no issues. No loss occurred during the process of merging with the corpse.

The corpse wasn't damaged during the specter's inhabitation either.

The operation was remarkably clean—no waste, efficient, and swift.

'…When did I ever handle it this well?'

Choi Jiyeon recalled with some reluctance.

Sensing vitality came quickly, but it took her several days to manipulate it solely within herself.

After extending her perception of vitality outward, mastering manipulation, and then entering into necromancy… the time it took to handle it this skillfully…

'Sigh… '

She mentally calculated and felt a fresh wave of frustration.

Some might call it the complaints of a spoiled brat, but evaluations are inherently relative, aren't they?

Watching the prodigy standing before her, she couldn't help but feel diminished.

Nothing in this world comes easy, but necromancy was an especially difficult art to master.

Most necromancers rely on innate abilities.

It's incredibly rare to find someone who can perceive and manipulate vitality without an innate ability and still learn necromancy.

In other words, most necromancers possess innate abilities that include necromancy.

That was the case with the con artists in China who manipulated specters, and it was the same with Choi Jiyeon's own Taesan.

Likewise, it was also the case with Lee Hayul's Taesan.

"……"

Lee Hayul had requested mentoring to gain insight into Taesan.

It wasn't an unusual request.

Taesan was an incredibly rare innate ability.

Meeting a Taesan user as a mentoring partner was a rare opportunity, so most would ask to gain insight into it.

Lee Hayul likely intended to secretly learn how to handle Taesan by requesting to observe it.

However, what Lee Hayul didn't anticipate was that Choi Jiyeon had already heard a rumor from her family that Lee Hayul might have manifested Taesan.

– Confirm whether he has truly manifested Taesan, and if so, teach him how to use it. If he's wielding Taesan… he'll eventually use it at a critical moment.

Choi Jiyeon had received this instruction directly from the head of the Taesan clan.

Teach Lee Hayul how to handle Taesan.

With that order in mind, Choi Jiyeon had been demonstrating the fundamental techniques of Taesan to Lee Hayul without any complaints.

'…What am I supposed to do with this… '

Choi Jiyeon felt a throbbing headache and sighed inwardly.

After witnessing Lee Hayul's vitality nearly deplete, she was leaning towards the conclusion that he had indeed manifested Taesan.

She hadn't yet seen him openly manifest it, but watching him handle vitality and necromancy so proficiently in such a short time only reinforced her belief.

When she thought about it, even his surname was ‘Lee.’ She wondered if that was some kind of foreshadowing… though she would have to ask him about the meaning.

Of course, there were still questions.

Why, despite being able to perceive and manipulate vitality, does he remain in a state where his vitality is nearly depleted?

Why doesn’t he feel any discomfort even though he knows Choi Jiyeon is infusing him with vitality?

If he has indeed manifested Taesan, why is his mana not of the earth element?

How is he able to handle both Taesan and Gop-hwa at the same time?

‘…This is so complicated… ’

She felt like sighing endlessly.

If the fact that Lee Hayul had manifested both Gop-hwa and Taesan became known… she couldn’t even imagine what kind of chaos would ensue.

Did the Gop-hwa clan even know that Lee Hayul had manifested Taesan?

Or did they know and keep it a secret, taking him in first?

Either way, the situation would become complicated.

From the perspective of the clan, they would naturally want to claim a child who had manifested their unique ability.

The same would be true for Taesan.

Even though there were frequent exchanges between the clans, and there were many cases where those with unique abilities from different clans

formed marriage alliances, officially changing one's family registry was a different matter altogether.

'Gop-hwa and Taesan… '

Swallowing yet another sigh, Choi Jiyeon looked at Lee Hayul with a complicated expression.

Baek Ahrin also had much to think about.

At first, she had been too busy managing Lee Hayul's Gop-hwa to have any other thoughts, but as time passed and Lee Hayul began to control Gop-hwa on his own, she found herself with a bit more leeway.

'Gop-hwa and Changhae… '

The simultaneous manifestation of Gop-hwa and Changhae.

It was something she knew to be impossible, but she didn't hold onto that belief too tightly. After all, common sense could always be shattered.

Manifesting Changhae, but having a different mana attribute? Well, Lee Hayul might be an exception.

The important thing was that Lee Hayul had manifested Changhae and, at the same time, Gop-hwa.

Lee Hayul was a unique existence.

Not in the trivial sense of everyone having their own life story, but in the literal sense—he was the only one who possessed both Gop-hwa and Changhae.

He was the only one who could understand the ice of Changhae and ignite the flames of Gop-hwa.

Moreover, he was the only case that had shown her the realistic possibility of

what could be.

Because of that, Baek Ahrin desperately needed Lee Hayul's help.

She glanced over.

Hong Yeon-hwa was clinging to Lee Hayul, talking non-stop as he focused on his necromancy training.

It was still hard to believe at times. She never imagined that wild dog could have such gentle eyes.

It didn't seem like anything serious had happened between them yet… but it was clear that their relationship was deeper than hers.

'What a shame.'

Baek Ahrin felt a pang of regret.

If only she had been more proactive at the start of the semester, before Hong Yeon-hwa got closer to him.

If she had, she wouldn't be feeling this strange sense of unease right now.

Baek Ahrin fidgeted with her hands.

Right now, everything was cold and hard, but she vividly remembered the warmth that had once melted her.

The coldness had retreated, and for a brief moment, a warmth had washed over her. She could still recall that fleeting sensation.

It was only the surface for now, but she hoped that one day, the flames would reach her heart, no matter how twisted it was.

'……'

That's why Baek Ahrin wanted to get closer to Lee Hayul.

No matter what kind of help she needed from him.

No matter what she had to become.

Even if she couldn't ask for help outright, even if she found herself in a situation where she couldn't ask at all.

It was a shameless thought, but… even if she ended up stabbing him in the back.

She wanted to be close enough that Lee Hayul would still reach out and help her.

That was all. She would do anything for that.

Baek Ahrin looked at Lee Hayul with a strange glint in her eyes.

'…Why are those girls staring like that?'

Meanwhile, Hong Yeon-hwa, who had caught a glimpse of Choi Jiyeon and Baek Ahrin's complicated and wistful(?) gazes, subtly furrowed her brow.

In that brief moment, her respectful titles for them had turned into 'those girls,' and her tone had become sharp, but she didn't particularly care.

After all, they were once close friends and sisters, and she felt comfortable with them. Besides, they had acted recklessly enough to deserve such treatment.

What was with all the unnecessary hugging and nonsense? Lee Hayul's natural wariness towards others was being exploited for sexual harassment. Honestly, she could report them right now.

The only reason Hong Yeon-hwa hadn't punched them was that she knew their personalities well, and more importantly, Lee Hayul himself had flailed his arms, stepping in front of her to stop her.

Especially Baek Ahrin—her recent behavior was really getting on Hong Yeon-hwa's nerves. She wanted to give her a good beating, but… doing so would only make Lee Hayul sad.

'Tsk.'

Clicking her tongue in frustration, Hong Yeon-hwa turned her gaze back to Lee Hayul.

Lee Hayul was intensely focused on manipulating the specters. Every time his hands formed a seal, the numerous specters surrounding him moved in perfect unison.

'Is the trial coming to an end? It's taking a while.'

Even now, the trial was likely stirring up unpleasant memories and emotions within him… but from the outside, Lee Hayul didn't seem too affected.

At most, his brows occasionally furrowed, and a bit of cold sweat made his scent more intense.

…Of course, at night, when he was drowsy and caught up in the atmosphere, he would become a bit clingy… but Hong Yeon-hwa didn't mind that at all.

In any case, the Gop-hwa trial was nearing its end. Once it concluded, Gop-hwa would undergo a change.

For reference, the Gop-hwa trial was treated as a sort of coming-of-age ceremony by the clan.

The first trial, in particular, was considered significant, and the elders of the clan had already begun preparing congratulatory gifts upon hearing the news.

'Gifts, huh… '

As her thoughts reached that point, Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly remembered

the bright red scarf.

The scarf that Lee Hayul had given her as his first gift. Although it wasn't the right season to wear it now, she had carefully stored it in a safe place after having it specially treated to prevent damage.

'I need to repay him for that… '

Hong Yeon-hwa pondered.

What kind of gift should she give him? What would make Lee Hayul happy?

She'd been thinking about it ever since she received the scarf, but she still couldn't come up with the perfect idea.

'It would be best to give it to him during the birthday festival, right? He'd remember it more if it's given on a special day like that… '

As she continued mulling over potential gifts, Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly recalled something she had said in the past.

– "Oh, um… Sorry. I'm not producing milk yet… but I'll definitely feed you later…"

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked absentmindedly and glanced down at her chest.

For some reason, the words she had spoken back then seemed strangely tempting.

That night.

In the middle of the night, when the moon was shining brightly.

I woke up briefly and shifted my body.

Soon, I felt a soft sensation on either side of me. One side was warm, and the

other was cool.

It was Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

I recalled the events before I had fallen asleep.

As the evening wore on and drowsiness crept in, the Gop-hwa trial had also flared up.

I had endured it in the arms of both Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin until I eventually drifted off to sleep between them.

'What is this… '

As the memories came back to me, I frowned.

Instead of the hands buried in the soft flesh, I gently rubbed my solar plexus with the Wings of the Sky.

Something felt off inside me.

To be precise, it felt like something was boiling—like flames were rising from within, heating my body.

'When will this trial finally end… '

Sleepiness began to wash over me again. I shook my head and buried my face back into the soft embrace.

– Fwoosh…

Suddenly, I heard the sound of flames flickering near my ears.

Along with it came a strange sensation, as if something was forming in my solar plexus.

* * *

[Unique Ability [???] is…]

[Unique Ability [Gop-hwa] has manifested.]

CHAPTER 199
FALSE DREAM?

“You’re here again.”

As I sat quietly, staring at the sky, a voice called out to me from behind.

Even without turning my head, I knew who it was.

The voice, the nature of the mana, the faint presence… all of it was familiar.

The sound of footsteps approached, and the person plopped down beside me.

“……”

For a while, there was silence. Occasionally, the distant roar of monsters would break the stillness and ring in my ears. As I let my thoughts drift away with the noise, I noticed a pair of eyes glancing at me from the side.

I subtly glanced to my side.

A woman with brown hair tied loosely in a ponytail. Her green eyes, like blades of grass, were filled with tension and worry. She was undeniably beautiful.

It was Choi Jiyeon, the successor of the Taesan clan.

“Um… well…”

Her voice was weak, dragging her words as if she was unsure of what to say.

“Why? Do you have something to say?”

“No, I was just wondering if you’ve cooled your head a bit.”

Now that the Gop-hwa had calmed down, I waited patiently and calmly. Choi Jiyeon, still gauging my mood, cautiously asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Yes, I’ve cooled off well. The Taesan effect is quite good.”

The volatile Gop-hwa had subsided, and now Taesan had taken over.

Just a short while ago, my emotions had been raging like fire, but now they had completely collapsed, and a sense of peace had suddenly welled up inside me.

If Changhae had taken over instead… I would have just become cold and indifferent.

‘I really have no difference from someone with bipolar disorder.’

The thought made me chuckle bitterly.

Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan. Every time one of these three unique abilities surfaced, or when they appeared simultaneously, it felt like my emotions were being manipulated.

Suddenly, I would be filled with rage, charging in like a mad dog. Then, just as suddenly, I would cool down and collapse from my own exhaustion. And sometimes, I would feel nothing at all, becoming a normal person again… Truly, there was no one crazier than me.

“…Taesan, huh…”

As I chuckled bitterly, Choi Jiyeon’s expression darkened.

She hesitated for a moment, then, as if making up her mind, she spoke.

“I lost my temper earlier. It wasn’t something worth getting worked up about, but I reacted irritably… It was my fault. I’m sorry.”

Her voice was firm, no longer the hesitant tone from earlier.

Though she still seemed tense and worried, she didn’t avoid my gaze this time.

I looked into her eyes for a moment, then turned my head forward, as if to avoid her gaze.

“There’s no need for you to apologize, senior. It was ultimately my fault. I couldn’t control the side effects and ended up lashing out again.”

“No, that’s not it. I should have responded calmly, knowing the situation. It was my mistake for not doing so…”

“Enough, let’s just say we were both at fault.”

For a while, we went back and forth, arguing about whose fault it was, until it all started to feel pointless.

What were we even doing, bickering like this?

“Pfft…”

As I shook my head at the absurdity, a small laugh came from beside me.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

When I raised an eyebrow and asked, Choi Jiyeon chuckled and shook her head.

I stared at her for a moment, then decided not to dig any deeper and changed the subject.

“So, how’s the situation outside? Still the same?”

“Yeah… it’s still the same.”

When I asked about the situation outside, Choi Jiyeon’s laughter abruptly stopped.

She shook her head, looking like she had aged ten years in an instant. I could guess the situation outside just from that look.

“Sigh.”

It was still a mess. I let out a deep sigh.

The situation I had feared since my days at Shio-ram had finally come to pass.

In the end, I had used my abilities recklessly in a place teeming with people, a place filled with surveillance devices.

As a result, the unique abilities of the Three Great Clans that I possessed had been exposed to the world… and everything had gone to hell.

Unrelated factions were in chaos, and the Three Great Clans, in particular, were completely turned upside down.

The memory of being swept up in the turmoil, at the center of that mess, made me shudder. It was a painful memory I didn’t want to recall.

Unable to bear it any longer, I had half-fled and settled at the Demonic Realm frontlines.

Surely, no one would be bold enough to follow me into the Demonic Realm.

‘Huu… ’

I couldn’t say I had no regrets.

But one thing was certain… Even if I could go back, I would do the same thing.

If I hadn't used my abilities then, everyone I could have saved would have died.

It was only because I used my abilities that I was able to save them.

Of course, some might laugh and say it was all meaningless.

…No, perhaps even I thought it was meaningless.

"……"

No matter how hard I struggled, the chances of stopping the invasion of the Tower were slim, and even if we managed to fend them off, the victory might be hollow.

'Tsk… '

I knew that, but I couldn't just sit idly by.

If it were something absolutely impossible, I would have accepted it.

If it were an unattainable delusion, no matter how hard I tried, I would have given up and resigned myself to it.

But it was right in front of me.

In a place within my sight, within arm's reach, there were people I could save with just a little more effort.

There were too many people like that for me to turn a blind eye and make excuses about it all being meaningless.

So, I asked myself again.

If they weren't illusions, if this world didn't disappear into nothingness but

continued on.

Could I live quietly, pretending not to see, without reaching out?

And when someone asked me one day if I had the right to feel wronged… Could I confidently and without hesitation say yes?

That's why I was fighting.

Not just for others, but to be able to stand tall before myself.

When I faced injustice or unfair treatment in the future, I wanted to be able to say without hesitation that I didn't live a life deserving of such treatment.

It might be an ideal too lofty for someone like me.

I had no real ability, but my greed was boundless.

In my desperate attempts to achieve my goals, I had sought power beyond my means, turning into a mentally unstable person with emotions that swung wildly.

And yet, the number of people I failed to save far outnumbered my successes.

"Junior, you're digging yourself into a hole again."

"?"

"What's wrong? Did Gop-hwa flare up again?"

Suddenly, a hand pressed against my cheek. When I turned my head, the fingers dug in further, and I saw Choi Jiyeon's worried face.

"It's nothing."

"Nothing? Your face says you're thinking gloomy thoughts again."

“I said it’s nothing.”

“I don’t know what’s bothering you, but…”

As I stood up to avoid her persistent poking, Choi Jiyeon also got up, following me.

“If you ever need help, just say the word. I’ve received so much help from you, after all. I’ll help you with everything I’ve got. Don’t worry, as you know, I’m quite capable.”

Choi Jiyeon’s expression was full of confidence. She didn’t look like the person who had been cautiously watching my mood earlier.

“……”

People can be so confusing.

Sometimes she seemed so reliable, and at other times, she looked so timid… People are complex, but Choi Jiyeon seemed to show this contrast more strongly than others.

Maybe that’s why I found her so likable. Especially when she showed her timid side, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of kinship.

Perhaps one of the reasons we became close so quickly was because Choi Jiyeon had acted timidly when she realized I had manifested Taesan. It made me feel comfortable around her.

That’s why I didn’t want her to die either. If the future continued, I hoped she would be happy.

With a strange expression, I slapped away the hand that had been brushing against my backside.

“I’m stronger than you, senior. And don’t touch my butt.”

“What? When did I touch your butt? I was just brushing off the dust!”

Smack! Choi Jiyeon’s hand was swatted away, and she cried out in protest, looking dumbfounded.

“Sigh… By the way, can you spare some time later? There’s something I want to talk about.”

After grumbling for a while, Choi Jiyeon finally sighed and, still watching my reaction, asked.

I tilted my head.

“Is there a need to set aside time? Just say it now.”

“No. I want to talk about it later. It’s something I need to prepare myself for.”

“What do you mean, prepare yourself… Fine. I’ll make time after I check inside one more time.”

I replied, feeling somewhat exasperated, but for some reason, Choi Jiyeon insisted on talking later.

In the end, I promised to make time after returning from the deepest part of the Demonic Realm.

“It might take a while, though. I’m going to clean things up quickly.”

“That’s fine. I’ll wait.”

Only after I promised to make time did Choi Jiyeon smile faintly, looking relieved.

* * *

[HP has reached 0.]

[The player has died.]

[Bad End 4 – Death in the “Deepest Part of the Demonic Realm.”]

[Calculating data.]

[Round: 3rd Round]

[Selected Setting: Vessel]

[System Title: Three Ends]

[Cause of Death: Self-destruction due to conflict between unique abilities]

* * *

“…Huh? Hayul?”

My submerged consciousness slowly resurfaced.

The muffled sound, as if I had been underwater, cleared up, and I heard a voice calling me.

[Huh?]

[Eh?]

[Dream…]

[Three Ends]

[Sadness]

My awareness floated up.

My senses returned. A cool sensation spread from the soft thing beneath my body.

The voice I heard above me seemed to belong to Baek Ahrin, calling my name.

[Eh?]

[Yes… What is it?]

Still half-asleep, I responded in a daze.

Pulling my head out from where it had been buried in warm flesh, I looked around.

Soon, Baek Ahrin's face, wearing a strange expression, came into view.

Her blue eyes alternated between looking at my face, the Necklace of Confession, and my lips, before she grabbed a tissue and dabbed at my mouth.

– Mmph…?

I tilted my head, wondering what she was doing. Why was she suddenly acting like this? As I puzzled over it, the tissue became damp.

'?'

A question mark floated above my head. The tissue that had been dabbing at my lips now wiped around my mouth, and moisture came off as well.

"Geez, you're all wet."

With a nonchalant expression, Baek Ahrin wiped my mouth and then glanced down at me.

My face, still groggy and dazed.

Baek Ahrin chuckled softly, pulled out a fresh tissue, and wiped down the damp spot on her chest.

It was the spot where I had buried my face just a moment ago.

'Oh… '

Suddenly, everything clicked in my foggy mind.

As my consciousness fully returned, I realized that my mouth had been hanging open. The moisture on my lips and Baek Ahrin's chest…

I figured it out. My face turned a bright shade of red.

"Falling asleep and drooling all over me, you must've slept really well, huh?"

As if delivering the final blow, Baek Ahrin gave me a playful smile and lightly patted my butt…

My face dropped in embarrassment.

* * *

On the way to the lecture hall.

Rummaging through her bag, Choi Jiyeon suddenly furrowed her brows.

A tickling sensation rose in her nose. She tried to hold it back, but it didn't work.

"Achoo!"

She let out a sneeze so loud that her whole body shook, momentarily drowning out the chatter around her.

Her friends, who had been talking beside her, widened their eyes.

"What's up? Jiyeon, why'd you sneeze all of a sudden? Do you have a cold?"

"If a Taesan manifestant can catch a cold, we're already dead, aren't we?"

"Haha! Did you hear that sneeze? It's so cute."

"No, it's not…"

Her friends, bored and eager for something to tease her about, jumped at the opportunity to poke fun at her.

Choi Jiyeon, who was always an easy target, was quickly overwhelmed by their teasing and looked like she was about to cry.

CHAPTER 200
TOO MUCH…

“Ughhhh…”

I had already embarrassed myself early in the morning. I let out a groan, messing with my hair for no reason.

“Not only did I sleep with my mouth wide open all night, but I was drooling too…”

And it wasn’t even on my pillow or blanket, but all over Baek Ahrin’s chest.

It was so ridiculous and humiliating that I couldn’t even lift my head.

Even if I had done it while sleeping alone, it would have been awkward, but I ended up bothering someone else…

“It’s okay. Drooling a bit isn’t going to wear out my chest or anything.”

Baek Ahrin chuckled softly as she watched me flailing about while sitting on the bed. She adjusted her loose clothing and then patted my back comfortingly as she came closer.

I turned my head slightly, avoiding her gaze.

Even though the victim herself said it was fine, the embarrassment didn’t go away.

Hong Yeon-hwa was still sound asleep. Even though she was someone who usually woke up at the slightest movement, it seemed like she was exhausted from helping me regulate my turbulent Gop-hwa last night.

“Sigh…”

I let out a deep sigh.

A little while later, Hong Yeon-hwa finally woke up from her dreamland.

“It seems like the trial is over.”

This was her comment after checking my condition before breakfast.

It wasn’t just a casual observation.

She sat me in her lap, and her hand slipped under my clothes to gently caress my stomach. Mana leaked from her soft palm, meticulously scanning my entire body.

“The heat has settled well. There’s no sign of it going berserk, and your mana has calmed down too.”

The trial of Gop-hwa had ended.

Since Hong Yeon-hwa was someone who could handle Gop-hwa at a master level, her words were trustworthy.

More than anything, I could feel it myself. Until yesterday, the mana that would transform into fiery energy and hammer at my emotions even when I stayed still was now calm and settled.

‘……’

Usually, a superhuman who awakens their unique ability can sense their own uniqueness.

From what I’ve heard, people don’t usually sense all the small and countless aspects like I do, but they can recognize the ones that stand out as their ‘ability.’

It was the same for me. Without even needing to use the Power of Observation, I could feel it just by focusing.

There was a sense of discomfort I had felt since waking up earlier.

With a strange expression, I rubbed my solar plexus.

Countless unique traits. Two were significantly prominent, and many others were clinging around them, gradually growing larger.

And near them, there was one more, something new that hadn't been there before—another prominent unique trait.

The perception was like a burning flame.

'Gop-hwa.'

I could sense it, but I couldn't understand it.

'I haven't activated Homogenization. So why… '

I could feel Gop-hwa.

Even though I hadn't gone through Homogenization, Gop-hwa was blatantly asserting its presence.

It wasn't a mistake. Both my senses and the Power of Observation were recognizing Gop-hwa.

I didn't understand it, but the result was clear.

I had manifested Gop-hwa. Not through imitation via Homogenization, but as something that had taken root within me.

'How?'

Confusion and complexity clouded my face.

When I think about it, it was strange that I had even undergone the trial of Gop-hwa.

In my third life, I had manifested Gop-hwa. I had first manifested a half-baked version of Gop-hwa and used it carefully every time I acted alone. Even after graduating from Shio-ram, I continued using it.

I had handled it for that long. But I had never faced the trial of Gop-hwa. I had assumed that since it was a half-baked version achieved through a loophole, there was no trial.

So I naturally thought I wouldn't face a trial either.

After all, I wasn't even a half-baked version; I was just temporarily imitating it.

It wasn't like I had a crude version of Gop-hwa embedded inside me. I was merely altering the nature of my mana to resemble Gop-hwa and manifesting its flames momentarily.

And yet, I underwent the trial, and now I had the real Gop-hwa rooted inside me.

'Does that mean I have to be wary of Gop-hwa from now on?'

Before, I didn't have to worry too much. I only had to manage my emotions temporarily when I ignited the flames. But from now on, I might be affected by Gop-hwa even in my daily life.

'If Changhae and Taesan also take root… will I become an emotional wreck, with my feelings swinging up and down like a madman?'

Suddenly, the dream I had earlier came to mind.

As with most dreams, I didn't remember it vividly, but certain parts stood out.

Gop-hwa, Changhae, Taesan… and Lee Hayul, who died in the deepest part of the Demonic Realm, wielding all three… Memories of the third life.

And the second life I had witnessed in the Tower of Growth.

'…I hope I can gain something from the Tower of Knowledge.'

Of course, it's uncertain whether I can even enter it right now.

In any case, the trial of Gop-hwa was over.

Thanks to that, my emotions were stable, and I wasn't having any inappropriate thoughts.

"It took longer than I expected. I thought it would end in a few days like mine…"

-Squeeze… Squish…

"Ugh…"

…I wasn't having those thoughts.

The sensation of a hand rubbing against my skin made me squirm in ticklish discomfort. The tickling was a physiological reaction, so there was nothing I could do about it.

My train of thought was abruptly cut off.

"It took almost ten days, right? It's finally over!"

Clap, clap—Elia's eyes sparkled as she clapped her hands together. A bright smile bloomed on her lips.

It wasn't just Hong Yeon-hwa and me in the living room.

Baek Ahrin, who had slept in the same bed, was also with us, and Elia and Seo-yul had come out of their rooms as well.

"Now there's no risk of Gop-hwa going berserk anymore, right?"

“Uh… for now, yes. But it’s not completely safe. Gop-hwa can still explode at any time, even outside of the trial…”

“So, it’s just like before? That’s great! Now we can all sleep together with Hayul and Seo-yul again, right?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“Seo-yul has been feeling really lonely lately. Isn’t that right, Seo-yul?”

“Yes, I want to sleep with Daddy.”

Seo-yul replied clearly, as if she had been waiting for the question.

Her sulky gaze pierced through me. My shoulders shrank involuntarily.

I hadn’t been able to play with her for a while because I had been focusing on controlling Gop-hwa. While I could move, I had devoted all my time to training to get used to Gop-hwa.

It seemed Seo-yul had been building up some frustration during that time.

“……”

Hong Yeon-hwa glanced back and forth between me, nestled in her arms, and Seo-yul, who was in Elia’s arms, with a conflicted expression.

She seemed dissatisfied, but at the same time, she couldn’t bring herself to separate a parent and child, judging by the complex look in her eyes.

After that, a strange silence settled over the living room.

“Now that the trial is over, has Hayul’s Gop-hwa changed as well?”

[Yes, it should have.]

Baek Ahrin’s carefree voice broke the silence.

I, who had been cautiously reading the room, perked up and responded.

I extended one hand forward.

It was both to change the atmosphere and to check the state of Gop-hwa. I knew that Gop-hwa had taken root within me, but I needed to manifest it directly to understand the difference.

I was curious about how Gop-hwa had changed.

Did Hong Yeon-hwa's power output increase? Maybe mine had increased similarly. If so, had the side effects also grown?

'Manifest, Gop-hwa.'

-Whoosh

Gop-hwa ignited in my palm.

For a moment, the bright morning sunlight was pushed back, and the color of the flame filled the surroundings.

The flame rose, stretching upward as if it were waking up from a deep slumber.

"Wow…"

The arms wrapped around my waist tightened. It was Hong Yeon-hwa, still holding me in her lap. She stared blankly at the flame, letting out a breath of admiration.

The others had similar reactions. Their eyes widened, and soft gasps of awe escaped their lips as they gazed at the flame.

"It's beautiful…"

That was Elia's assessment.

I couldn't help but agree, even as I observed the flame myself.

It flickered violently, like a burst of life, yet twisted gracefully, as if acknowledging the natural flow of the world. Watching it was like witnessing an elegant dance performance.

The color was still red, but somehow, it felt brighter and warmer. It was a color that emphasized warmth rather than danger.

More than anything, the flame itself was aesthetically pleasing. My brain registered it as such.

"Wow, wow… It's so beautiful…"

"…Yeon-hwa. Is it possible for Gop-hwa to change like this?"

"Huh? Oh… There have been cases where the nature of Gop-hwa changed, but I've never heard of such a unique transformation."

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been holding my hand with the flickering Gop-hwa, stammered as she replied. It seemed she was too absorbed in admiring the flame.

It wasn't just Hong Yeon-hwa. Everyone had gathered close to me, watching the flame from up close.

'…Why is a flame so beautiful?'

I tilted my head in confusion. I had expected the power output to increase, but suddenly, the atmosphere of the flame had changed drastically.

On the surface, it looked more like a ceremonial flame than one meant for combat.

Everyone continued to admire the flame until I extinguished it.

With the end of the trial, the ticking time bomb that had been attached to me

was gone.

Of course, the danger hadn't completely disappeared.

I still had to be cautious of Gop-hwa's side effects, which I could previously pick and choose when to deal with by using Homogenization. Now, I had to be mindful of them even in my daily life.

Still, the immediate risk of the bomb going off had vanished. Thanks to that, Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin no longer had to stick to me at all times.

For some reason, both Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin seemed a bit disappointed, while Elia was just happy that the trial had ended safely.

In any case, I could finally resume my activities.

There was a lot of work piled up.

First, I had to deal with the assignments that had accumulated from missing classes and attend the important lectures that I couldn't afford to skip.

But above all else, there was one thing I had to do first.

"It's been a while, Cadet Lee Hayul."

[Yes, hello.]

I had come to the top floor of the Central Administrative Building for the first time in a while.

Sitting across the table from me was the Vice Principal, distinguished by her violet eyes and hair, who bowed her head slightly in greeting.

This was the meeting with the Vice Principal that I had arranged in advance.

I returned the greeting with a bow, but I couldn't help but feel a hint of frustration creeping into my expression.

There were so many things I wanted to talk about, so many complaints I wanted to vent.

There was also the matter of entering the Tower of Knowledge. Would they let me in? If not, why?

And the second life I had witnessed in the Tower of Growth. Who was that person? Why did I feel pain? Why did they show me the second life? Are there other lives as well? Why did the Principal bring me here?

There were so many questions I had held back but now wanted to ask.

“First, take this.”

[?]

Just as I was about to unleash my barrage of questions, the Vice Principal suddenly reached into the air. A subspace opened up. I could have blocked it with the Power of Space, but I let it be for now.

The Vice Principal rummaged through the subspace and then pulled out two keys.

One was a luxurious golden key, and the other was a simple silver key.

The Vice Principal handed both keys to me.

[What are these?]

In response to my question, the Vice Principal replied nonchalantly.

“They are the keys to Shio-ram’s secret vault and the Tower of Knowledge.”

[What?]

The complaints I had been about to unleash were abruptly silenced.

CHAPTER 201
PLEASE DON'T THROW IT AWAY

There were many things I wanted to ask.

Since the moment I opened my eyes in this world… no, since I came to life, the questions I held inside grew more numerous as time passed.

Even so, I never tried to meet with the Vice President or the Principal to ask him.

To be honest, I was scared. I didn't understand my own situation well, and I didn't know theirs either.

What if I went to meet them and ended up in a terrible situation? So, I thought it would be better to just accept what was given… that was my mindset.

But now, my thoughts have changed.

Inside the Tower of Growth, I encountered something similar to 'me'.

What was merely a character in a game brutally sliced me apart, taught me with a bitter expression, and offered apologies with a remorseful face.

I had a dream.

There was someone who, despite suffering from the burden of excessive ideals and the power that didn't match his emotions, wanted to prevent the tragedies and misfortunes within reach.

I came to inquire about him.

'…A key?'

It didn’t immediately lead to a question.

The Vice President’s words froze my mind for a moment.

I stared blankly, then glanced at the two keys that were subtly presented to me.

One was a splendid golden key, and the other was a refined silver key. Both radiated an unusual energy. It wasn’t just their material or decoration; there was a distinctive aura that even an ordinary person could sense.

Shio-ram possesses various treasures.

Artifacts with outstanding performance.

Potions of quality that promise revolutionary growth.

Rare materials that are so scarce that even when considering both light and shadow, they are hard to come by.

Whatever they may be, they are treasures in the truest sense, difficult to acquire with money, and most of the time, even powerful factions come back empty-handed after searching tirelessly.

Such treasures are actively awarded to students by Shio-ram.

They can be exchanged for accumulated credits, or included as prizes in various event schedules. There are numerous systems in place to ensure students receive them.

I, too, am a beneficiary of that privilege. Didn’t I once gather credits all at once during the entrance ceremony of the first semester and obtain the Wings of the Sky?

Of course, unless one has a unique case like mine, it would take some time to gather credits, but in any case, there are many means to receive treasures.

The place where such treasures are kept under strict security is the Bigo.

As the name Bigo implies, its location is kept secret… but I know where it is.

I had entered it last time, and while observing blankly, I was able to discern its location naturally.

Of course, the defenses are well-established. For someone like me, who does not wield powers, the level of defense was such that neither peering nor entry was possible.

It was a place where the term madness truly fits, with a stack of spells that could give one a headache just from observation.

The golden key is said to be a key to access Bigo.

The very fact that they handed me a key means they have transferred the access rights.

I know the location. I have the key.

In other words, I can visit Bigo at any time and bring out whatever I desire.

I had anticipated receiving something, but this was too shocking.

And the silver key is…

“The Tower of Knowledge.”

A secluded tower hidden on a floating island. It was so well hidden that most people in this world don’t even know of its existence.

Thus, the world widely recognizes the term “Four Great Towers,” excluding the Tower of Knowledge.

Even high-ranking superhumans who have built considerable skills only know of its existence but not what it actually does.

A key to such a tower was presented to me.

In that moment, I found myself with a blank expression.

“I expected Bigo, but…”

I didn’t expect a good answer. Given that they hadn’t revealed anything until now, it seemed there was some reason behind it, and they didn’t appear to intend to share any secrets with me.

So, I thought they might just give me something and send me back.

But I never imagined they would hand me the entire key, let alone the key to the Tower of Knowledge.

“No, was there a key from the start?”

I realized for the first time that a key existed from the beginning.

In the original work, both Bigo and the Tower of Knowledge could be accessed through the spatial magic of the Vice President.

If one does not go through the Vice President, the player must carve their own path. That’s why I invaded directly in the 11th round. It was the reason for the destruction of Shio-ram and the collapse of the floating island.

In reality, I couldn’t destroy the entire Tower of Growth, and I couldn’t find the tower master in the Tower of Knowledge, which was practically shattered.

But to think there was a separate access key…

“I cannot resolve the doubts you hold, Student Lee Hayul.”

As I blinked in surprise at the sudden appearance of the key, the always expressionless Vice President spoke.

I shook off my confusion and hardened my expression.

[A satisfactory answer, you say?]

[Are you saying you know what I might ask?]

“The Principal did not explain the circumstances to you, so I believe you must have many questions.”

[That’s why I came here to hear the answers.]

“As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult to provide a satisfactory answer.”

[Why is that? Why can’t I receive an answer? The Principal, the master of the Tower of Growth, why…]

“It is a situation similar to yours, Student Lee Hayul.”

[A situation similar to mine?]

A situation similar to mine? What does that mean? Just as I was about to ask, a memory suddenly surfaced.

It wasn’t a complete memory.

Previously, when everyone had gathered in my dormitory, they suddenly expressed doubts about my eyes and throat that had opened up.

Not wanting to expand the secret any further, I tried to convey the truth…

The memory cut off.

For an inexplicable reason, I nearly died. Blood poured out in the seventh round, and my body was on the verge of shattering.

“Perhaps what you’re thinking right now is correct.”

As I stood frozen, the Vice President tilted a teacup from which steam was

rising, speaking with a somewhat relaxed demeanor.

“Similar measures have been taken for both the Principal and myself. Therefore, there are complications in casually disclosing our stories.”

[What does that mean…]

My head felt complicated.

A headache arose as if something were striking the inside of my skull with a sharp object. I frowned and pressed my temples with my fingers.

[I don’t understand.]

[Wasn’t it you who brought me here?]

[Then why have such measures been taken for you…?]

“It is difficult for me to provide answers.”

[But initially, the restrictions placed on me…]

“However.”

A voice interrupted the voice of the necklace. The Vice President gently set down the teacup. Then, she slid one of the keys that had been on the table towards me.

The silver key… the key to the Tower of Knowledge.

“This one has relatively lighter circumstances. I dare to advise that it may resolve some of the doubts you hold, Student Lee Hayul.”

[…The Tower of Knowledge.]

Round and round, it leads back to the Tower of Knowledge.

If I could just gain entry, I could search for the tower master, and if not, I

could at least hear some secrets from the place I intended to go to study magic.

“And this is, according to the words left by the Principal, the key to Bigo.”

The Vice President then subtly presented the golden key.

“It grants not only access rights but also the authority to use items within Bigo. Please feel free to use this Bigo as you see fit.”

Before I knew it, the keys to Shio-ram Bigo and the Tower of Knowledge were placed in front of me.

A complicated expression settled on my face.

The key to Bigo, where treasures piled high.

The key to the Tower of Knowledge, where I could improve my magical skills and possibly receive answers to my doubts.

This was an unexpected gain.

Although I didn’t receive an answer right away, I had received keys to places where I could find answers and treasures.

I chewed my lips in a complex emotion and bowed my head slightly.

[…Thank you.]

“I feel ashamed to receive your gratitude. I merely carried out the task I was requested to do, and I am sorry I could not provide a satisfactory answer.”

The Vice President merely bowed her head in return, stating she was not in a position to accept thanks.

Seeing that, I swallowed the complicated breath that was about to burst forth.

The Vice President was truly difficult to read. Even with the power of observation, I could not glean any meaningful information about her.

Even if I learned her body measurements, there would be no use for it. Of course, I had only met her a handful of times…

[Then, I will take my leave.]

With my business concluded, I stood up.

I didn't forget to take the keys with me. Instead of putting them directly into my spatial pocket, I first tucked them into my arms.

"Oh, and this…"

[Yes?]

Just as I was about to turn my body, the Vice President stopped me and pulled something else from her spatial pocket.

'What else is there?'

I examined what the Vice President presented.

It was another key. However, unlike the previous two keys, it lacked any mystical aura. It was merely luxurious in appearance… and aside from the complex spells inscribed on it, I couldn't find anything particularly special.

[What is this…?]

"This is the key to the mansion. Its location is very close to the first-year dormitory where you reside."

[A mansion?]

[Why are you giving this to me…?]

Tilting my head in confusion, I asked, and the Vice President answered with

a nonchalant demeanor.

“Have you not been short on rooms lately? The basic dormitory is spacious overall, but the number of rooms is somewhat lacking for many people living together.”

[Really? That is true… no, wait.]

My body froze for a moment.

[How did you know about that?]

How did she know about my dorm situation?

I instinctively stepped back, leaning against the wall, showing my wariness. I was ready to escape at any moment.

At my reaction, the usually expressionless Vice President displayed a hint of disbelief.

Of course, that expression quickly melted away, returning to her usual impassive face.

“…I recommend occasionally checking the community. Generally, it consists of meaningless chatter, but you may also find various rumors or useful information.”

‘Ah.’

The tension in my body wavered slightly.

The reason the Vice President mentioned the community… was because… I see… rumors had spread…

[…Thank you.]

“…Yes.”

I blankly opened my mouth and then gently accepted the key.

Thus, my business concluded.

Although I didn't receive an immediate answer, I gained a lot. Moreover, since I could still hear answers later, I had exceeded my original goal.

Exiting the central administrative office where the Vice President's office was located, I checked the time.

"It's almost lunchtime."

It was nearing lunchtime. Observing the surroundings, I noticed the administrative staff were also wrapping up their morning tasks.

Restaurants in the commercial district were preparing to welcome the lunchtime crowd.

And today was the day of my lecture with my mentor.

"I can go directly to my mentor."

I smiled and quickened my steps.

Soon, I arrived at the old training ground.

The sun hung high in the sky, heating the ground under the scorching weather.

My mentor was leaning against a tree on the outskirts of the old training ground, as if to avoid the sunlight.

[Mentor!]

As I waved my hand excitedly, my mentor, who had been gazing blankly at the sky, suddenly looked startled, then quickly recognized me and responded with a somewhat awkward greeting.

Seeing that, I swallowed my unease.

Since the last time, my mentor's demeanor had strangely changed. To be precise… she seemed awkward around me.

This change began after I had unexpectedly won a match during our last sparring session.

I don't know the reason. Whenever I asked, she would only brush it off.

But it was clear that the fault lay with me, not my mentor.

I must have made a mistake… or perhaps an offense.

"I need to apologize first, no matter what."

I had been waiting for the right moment to apologize since the last time, but I missed the timing due to the Trial of Gop-hwa. Therefore, I had to make sure to apologize this time.

"I prepared a gift, so maybe she'll soften up a bit…"

I recalled the picnic basket I had stored in my spatial pocket.

I had learned from our last meal together that my mentor liked sandwiches.

So, this morning, I quickly prepared several types of sandwiches and stored them carefully in my spatial pocket.

It was a sort of gift offensive.

If I presented it alongside my apology, perhaps it would lighten her mood a bit… that was my cunning plan.

After all, she wouldn't explode in anger or completely ignore me, so she probably wasn't too upset.

With those thoughts in mind, I cautiously approached my mentor.

And then.

“I now wonder if this time is truly necessary for you…”

‘…Huh?’

I heard words that should not have been spoken.

Do I need this…?

That couldn’t be true, what does that mean…

– Whoosh!

Suddenly, a wave of profound despair crashed over me, darkening my consciousness.

* * *

“I now wonder if this time is truly necessary for you…”

The reason Atra uttered such words was none other than the issue of efficiency.

In the last sparring session, Atra was momentarily overwhelmed by Lee Hayul.

In an instant, Lee Hayul had grabbed her wrist and thrown her to the ground.

The shock she received was beyond measure.

There were many excuses.

When facing Lee Hayul, she always imposed limits on her physical abilities.

She also restricted her techniques and blocked all her unique abilities.

Even while being subdued, Atra had thought of many countermeasures.

She could have raised her physical abilities, or she could have unleashed her mana or qi recklessly. She could have activated her White Night and countered with her technique expansion abilities.

However, she refrained from doing so for fear of injuring Lee Hayul due to her poor control over her strength.

No matter how many excuses she made, Atra had lost once.

The reason it was possible was that, before discussing carelessness, Lee Hayul's skills had risen to that level.

'…It won't be long before I am surpassed.'

A student surpassing their teacher is something often seen around.

Atra had never entertained the foolish thought that she would remain stronger forever.

However, she never expected to be caught up to this much so early in the second semester of her first year.

'Now, there's not much I can teach.'

There would surely be many things if she looked hard enough. There were definitely things to gain from repeated sparring.

But what if, during that time, Lee Hayul trained in other techniques…?

Magic, spirit arts, necromancy… Lee Hayul had many talents.

It seemed more efficient to invest time in other skills rather than learn the combat techniques she had already mastered from Atra.

Of course, she had no intention of abruptly ending her lectures.

She wasn't cutting off completely; she was merely considering finding other ways.

With that thought, she opened her mouth to seek Lee Hayul's opinion.

She faced Lee Hayul, who suddenly charged at her.

Atra's eyes widened in surprise. Instinctively, she opened her arms to embrace Lee Hayul.

– Thud

"What?"

The impact was quite significant. For a moment, her body wobbled before collapsing into a sitting position.

Thud! She landed on her bottom.

Atra blinked in confusion at the sudden situation.

She had never anticipated that Lee Hayul would charge at her and knock her down.

"Ugh…"

A ticklish sensation penetrated through her confusion, causing Atra's shoulders to shudder.

Her chest filled with breath. The panting breath caught her shameful scent, and the exhaled breath filled her chest.

From below, a sweet aroma wafted up.

When she glanced down, she saw Lee Hayul burying his face in her ample chest.

"Student? Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?"

Although Atra was perplexed, she naturally patted Lee Hayul's shoulder and asked gently.

Lee Hayul did not respond.

– Squeeze…!

Instead, he only pulled tightly at her waist with both hands.

Their bodies were tightly pressed against each other without any gaps.

The sensation of their bellies rubbing against each other made Atra's face flush.

"St-Student…?"

Why was this child acting like this all of a sudden?

What… what? What other problem had arisen? A sudden surge of concern and worry filled her mind.

"Student, are you hurt? Just a moment, let me see your face…"

– Creak…

[I'm sorry.]

Just as Atra was about to check Lee Hayul's face, a noise rang out.

It was an unpleasant sound, as if metal were scraping against metal, drowning out all the surrounding sounds.

Atra's actions came to an abrupt halt.

'Just now…?'

– Creak…

[It’s all my fault. I’m truly sorry.]

A strange sense of discomfort washed over her. Only then did Atra notice something was off. Her body trembled.

It wasn’t Atra who was trembling. It was Lee Hayul, who was nestled in her embrace.

Lee Hayul’s shoulders shook. He sounded as if he were desperately stifling something… a sound like he was on the verge of tears from fear made Atra’s expression harden.

“What are you saying? What did you do wrong—”

– Creak…!

[No! It’s all my fault! So please don’t throw me away!]

With a tight grip… the arms wrapped around her waist exerted force. The trembling hands clung desperately to Atra’s waist as if using all their strength.

– Creak…!

The Necklace of Confession screamed.

[Whatever it is, it’s my fault, so I’ll fix it all!]

[Please don’t throw me away!]

[I don’t want to fall away!]

[I can’t be without you!]

[I’m really sorry for everything I did wrong.]

[Please, I’ll fix anything!]

[I'll do anything, just please don't throw me away…!]

Along with the unpleasant noise, a desperate plea filled the air, no longer devoid of emotion.

Atra's face hardened to an extreme degree.



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